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**THE PLAYWRIGHT AS FILMMAKER:
HISTORY, THEORY AND PRACTICE**

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ABSTRACT

The central hypothesis of this study is that where playwrights have succeeded as film directors, it is as a result of building on those qualities which make them effective as authors within theatre. After establishing the existence of a substantial body of work by a variety of playwright-filmmakers upon which to draw, I review the literature examining the relationship between theatre and film. Following on from this, I critically assess the status of the author within film theory, as a means of justifying my approach to the analysis of relevant film texts. The next stage of my research involves analysing the work of selected playwright-filmmakers (Preston Sturges, David Mamet, Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Neil LaBute), attempting to isolate those aspects of their practice which are attributable to their experience as writers working in live theatre. Parallel to this, I attempt to develop a theoretical practice based on what I discovered; a process involving the development of a “*Dogme*”-style manifesto, and the production of three short films: *The Beauty*, *My Enemy’s Enemy* and *I’m Not Like This*. The project culminates in a discussion of the extent to which every playwright might be considered a potential filmmaker.

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INTRODUCTION

As a performed and published playwright (Smith, 2003), with an academic interest in film (the thesis submitted as part of my Masters degree having been on the subject of African-American cinema of the early 1990s), the initial inspiration for this project was the desire to integrate my experience in these two areas. Preliminary research threw up potentially fruitful fields of study such as “the play adaptation as film” and “the screenplay as literature”. Further investigation, however, suggested the potential value of pursuing a programme which addressed the socio-cultural discrepancies in respect of both the production and reception of works intended for the cinema and the theatre from a largely unexplored perspective, i.e. that of the creative writer.

From its very beginnings, the film industry has sought to benefit from theatre’s greater cultural capital (a notion first articulated by Pierre Bourdieu, 1984, extensively discussed by Frow, 1995). Shakespearean adaptations, for example, have been commonplace since Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree was filmed performing extracts from *King John* in 1899 (directed by William Kennedy-Laurie Dixon, who shot four scenes, only one of which survives - see Kachur, 1991), and there has long been a tradition of Hollywood actors seeking to prove themselves on the stages of Broadway and London’s West End. Relatively few canonical films, however have been derived from plays - the earliest of these being *Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915 - based on the novel and play *The Clansman* by Thomas R. Dixon), with later examples including *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940 - based on a play by Philip Barry), *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942 - based on the then unproduced

Everybody Comes to Rick's by Murray Burnett and Joan Alison), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Elia Kazan, 1951 - in which Marlon Brando reprised his role from the 1947-1949 Broadway production of Tennessee Williams' play), the thriller *Dial M for Murder* (1954, from the play by Frederick Knott, Alfred Hitchcock's sole experiment with 3-D filmmaking), and *Alfie* (Lewis Gilbert, 1966 - from the 1963 stage play by Bill Naughton which was itself adapted from his 1962 radio play). The fact that these are exceptions to the rule would suggest that as the form developed as a commercial entity, it became clear that those films whose narratives were structured along novelistic lines were more likely than others to retain audience interest, and were more amenable to the kind of multiple authorship which became inherent to the industrial mode of production.

Nevertheless, throughout the history of cinema, playwrights have consistently found employment as screenwriters. In recent years, the mechanics and philosophy of screenwriting has become a subject of academic study (Horne, 1992; Rush & Baughman, 1997; Kohn, 1999); and the contribution made to cinema by other professionals who have learned their trade whilst working in theatre - actors, directors and designers, for example - has been the subject of numerous scholarly and biographical studies. The impact of playwright-filmmakers - that is to say, those authors working with text-based theatre in the Western tradition, who have chosen to become film directors - has been largely ignored, however, other than in respect of that relatively small number of individuals whose cinematic *oeuvres* have been deemed worthy of scholarly attention *per se*, Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Woody Allen being the prime examples.

My hypothesis is that where playwright-filmmakers have succeeded within cinema, it is as a result of building on those qualities which make them unique as

authors within theatre, rather than through whole-heartedly absorbing formulaic cinematic values. My methodology involves what is essentially a grounded theory approach. This entails examining the work of a number of playwrights who have ventured into film-making, investigating not only the contexts in which they have produced their most critically well-regarded pieces, but also their approach to theme, style, dialogue, narrative and performance. In parallel with this, three short films will be produced (each more formally ambitious than its predecessor), in which principles derived from what I have learned from these case studies will be applied, and from which a theoretical position can be developed.

My broad objective in this project is to contribute to that body of work within film scholarship in which authorship and the fostering of creativity are taken more seriously as objects of study than within “classical” film theory.

CHAPTER ONE:

THE PLAYWRIGHT-FILMMAKER - A BODY OF WORK

From the earliest days of sound cinema, successful playwrights have consistently been employed as screenwriters, whether adapting their own work, creating original pieces, or as part of the Hollywood production line. Lillian Hellman, for example, adapted her 1939 play *The Little Foxes* (William Wyler, 1941), as well as writing the story and screenplay for the Ukrainian-set anti-Nazi propaganda film *The North Star* (Lewis Milestone, 1943), for which she earned an Academy Award nomination;¹ John Steinbeck, having adapted his 1937 novella *Of Mice and Men* for stage and screen (Lewis Milestone, 1939) went on to write scripts for Hitchcock (*Lifeboat*, 1944) and Kazan (*Viva Zapata*, 1952); and William Inge, as well as adapting his 1955 play *Bus Stop* for director Joshua Logan (1956), also wrote the Academy Award-winning original screenplay for *Splendor in the Grass* (Elia Kazan, 1961). British playwrights have also made their mark: Harold Pinter has written a number of screenplays for highly regarded films, such as *The Servant* (Joseph Losey, 1963), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Karel Reisz, 1981), and *The Handmaid's Tale* (Volker Schlöndorff, 1990)); Tom Stoppard worked on *Despair* (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1978), *Brazil* (Terry Gilliam, 1985), and *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1998); and Edward Bond, as well as scripting *Walkabout* (Nicolas Roeg, 1971), contributed dialogue to *Blow-Up* (Michaelangelo Antonioni, 1966), and *Nicholas and Alexandra* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1971).

The career-path from playwright to film director, however, is somewhat less well-travelled, Hollywood's fabled disrespect for the writer having given rise to a

¹ Information re dates, personnel etc. derived from sources such as Maltin, 1998, www.allmovie.com, and The Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com).

sizeable sub-genre of twentieth-century American literature (e.g. Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*, Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run* and Norman Mailer's *Deer Park*) not to mention cinema itself (e.g. *In a Lonely Place* (Nicholas Ray, 1950), *The Bad and the Beautiful* (Vincente Minnelli, 1952), *Barton Fink* (Joel Coen, 1992), *The Player* (Robert Altman, 1992)). Conversely, a significant number of canonical film directors have had successful parallel careers directing in theatre (e.g. Ingmar Bergman, Elia Kazan, Orson Welles, Sergei Eisenstein, George Cukor, Franco Zeffirelli, Max Ophuls, Lindsay Anderson) and in recent years, a number of directors from British theatre have earned both critical plaudits and box-office respectability in the film industry on both sides of the Atlantic (a trend discussed by Herman, 1997). Stephen Daldry, for example, found success with the North of England-set *Billy Elliot*, 2000 (UK), and prestige Hollywood project *The Hours*, 2002 (USA); Nicholas Hytner (*The Madness of King George*, 1994, UK; *The Object of My Affection*, 1998, USA), Roger Michell (*Notting Hill*, 1999, UK; *Changing Lanes*, 2002, USA), and Danny Boyle (*Trainspotting*, 1996, UK; *The Beach*, 2000, USA) have been similarly mobile; while all of Sam Mendes' films to date (*American Beauty*, 1999; *Road to Perdition*, 2002; *Jarhead*, 2005) have been American-themed.

One might suggest that experienced theatre directors are sought out by the film industry because of their proven skill in respect of finding ways to translate the textual into the visual, and controlling actors, crews and limited budgets. The writer, on the other hand, has customarily been viewed within the industry as simply one of many technicians (indeed, one of several writers) contributing to any major film project.

Many qualities prized within theatre writing, such as lyricism, discursiveness, evidence of political engagement, the willingness to raise complex philosophical questions, and resistance to easy narrative resolution, are antithetical to the conventions of Hollywood populism. When a playwright becomes a filmmaker, however, the question of creative control is potentially disruptive of the conventional wisdom not only within the commercial cinema, but also within those areas of film theory where the “author” has traditionally been a troublesome concept. Before tackling these issues, however, it will be useful to provide a brief outline of the history of the playwright-filmmaker in Western cinema.

The playwright-filmmaker during Hollywood’s Classical Period

“Classical” Hollywood has been defined (e.g. by Bordwell & Thompson, 1993) as that period between c. 1917 and 1960, in which the studio system held sway, and the norms of continuity editing and invisible narration were established. Amongst America’s literary community, one of the most vitriolic critics of the film industry was Ben Hecht, a journalist, playwright, and prolific screenwriter (films he worked on included *Wuthering Heights* (William Wyler, 1939) and *Spellbound* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1945)), who once wrote that:

Movies are one of the bad habits that corrupted our century. Of their many sins, I offer as the worst their effect on the intellectual side of the nation. It is chiefly from that viewpoint I write of them-as an eruption of trash that has lamed the American mind and retarded Americans from becoming a cultured people.²

² From “What the Movies Are,” bk. 5, *A Child of the Century* (1954), quoted online at <http://www.memorablequotations.com/hecht.htm> (accessed 22/01/2004).

Hecht's negative attitude was doubtless informed by his awareness of the unique nature of the conditions of relative artistic autonomy under which he, in collaboration with Charles MacArthur, with whom he had written the play *The Front Page* (which had its first success on Broadway in 1928), became the American film industry's first playwright-filmmaker. Under the patronage of Adolph Zukor, head of Paramount Studios, and working for the most part with cinematographer Lee Garmes, they wrote, produced, and directed several films from a base in New York:- *Crime Without Passion* (1934), *The Scoundrel* (1935, starring Noël Coward), *Once in a Blue Moon* (1935), and *Soak the Rich* (1936). After this arrangement came to an end, Hecht directed and produced three further works based on his original screenplays:- *Angels Over Broadway* (1940), *Spectre of the Rose* (1946), *Actors and Sin* (1952), once again in collaboration with Garmes. It is *The Front Page*, however, especially in its 1940 film version (renamed *His Girl Friday*, directed by Howard Hawks, 1940 - it was also adapted, under its original title, by Lewis Milestone in 1931, and Billy Wilder in 1974) with its fast-paced dialogue and atmosphere of comic cynicism, which remains his best-known work.

Another Broadway success of the era was *Strictly Dishonorable*, whose author, Preston Sturges, was invited to Hollywood, at the time of its adaptation into a film (John Stahl, 1931). He remained there, working as a successful contract screenwriter for several years. By 1940, his reputation was such that he was able to broker an unprecedented deal with the studio, Paramount, whereby he would sell them his script for *The Great McGinty* for a nominal fee, on condition that they would allow him to direct it. The film, a political satire, was a success (also winning an Academy Award for Best Screenplay), and Sturges went on to write and direct a string of highly regarded comedies - *Christmas in July* (1940), *The Lady Eve* (1941),

Sullivan's Travels (1941), *The Palm Beach Story* (1942), *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944),³ *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944) - this run coming to an end with the failure of comedy-drama *The Great Moment* (1944). At this point, he left Paramount, and began working as an independent. He largely failed to replicate his former accomplishments, however, making only four more films prior to his death in 1959, only one of which (*Unfaithfully Yours*, 1948) came close to being as highly regarded as his earlier work (according to Houston, 1965, and Errigo, 2004).

One of the most successful Broadway figures of the era was George S. Kaufman, co-author with Moss Hart of comedies such as *Once in a Lifetime* (1930) and *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1939). He turned to directing film relatively late in his career with an irreverent satire about a politician who uses the contents of his diary to blackmail his party bosses - *The Senator Was Indiscreet* in 1947 (written by Charles MacArthur), which earned its star, William Powell a New York Film Critics Circle award for Best Actor.

Due to the linguistic and political radicalism of plays such as *Waiting for Lefty* and *Golden Boy* in the mid-1930s, Clifford Odets became, according to fellow playwright Arthur Miller, "more wildly and lavishly celebrated than any playwright before or since" (Miller, 2000, p304). Once his Broadway success began to wane, however, he went to Hollywood - he is generally accepted (see Ebert, 1991) to be the model for the radical playwright invited to a nightmarish Los Angeles in *Barton Fink* (Joel Coen, 1991) - where as well as becoming a sporadically successful screenwriter (e.g. *The General Died at Dawn* (Lewis Milestone, 1936), *Sweet Smell of Success* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1957)), he also began to direct. In 1944 he adapted Richard Llewelyn's novel *None But the Lonely Heart* into a film which made the New York

³ These four films all featured in the American Film Institute's 2002 poll of the 100 funniest American movies of the twentieth century (www.afi.com).

Times' Annual 'Ten Best' list (Steinberg, 1981, p399), and provided Cary Grant with a role which earned him an Academy Award nomination. Towards the end of his life, Odets also directed the courtroom drama *The Story on Page One* (1959), although his most celebrated later work is probably his play *The Big Knife* (1949), a savage indictment of Hollywood amorality which was later adapted for the screen (Robert Aldrich, 1955).⁴

The playwright-filmmaker on the European mainland

To assert that Hecht and Sturges were the first playwright-filmmakers would be to ignore Jean Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un poète*, produced in France in 1930. While Cocteau had written plays prior to this, including *Orphée* (1926), he was, however, primarily a poet and visual artist, the bulk of whose theatre work had involved writing scenarios for ballet and opera. The film, in which "Cocteau attempts what few would dare: the visualisation of an interior space, namely, the poet's mind" (Morris, 2000), probably owes more to his association with the Surrealists (and possibly his experiments with opium, according to Levin, 2003) than to his experience as a playwright. Cocteau did not resume his directorial career until *La Belle et La bête*, in 1946, following which he made versions of his plays *Les Parents terribles* (1938) and *L'Aigle à deux têtes* (1946) (both filmed in 1948), before producing *Orphée* (1950) and *Le Testament d'Orphée* (1959), which cemented his position as one of the few domestic auteurs afforded respect by the *Cahiers Du Cinéma* critics, who largely derided the self-consciously literary/theatrical tradition of French film-making; in 1959, the 100th issue of the journal was dedicated to

⁴ With a screenplay by James Poe who went on to adapt a number of major literary works for the screen, e.g. Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Richard Brooks, 1958), and Horace McCoy's novel *They Shoot Horses Don't They* (Sydney Pollack, 1969)

Cocteau, and both Alain Resnais and Jean-Luc Godard cited him as an influence in terms of visual style (Hayward, 1996).

Amongst Cocteau's contemporaries were playwright-filmmakers Sacha Guitry (e.g. *Le Roman d'un Tricheur* (1935), *Napoléon* (1955)) and Marcel Pagnol (e.g. *La Fille du Pustier* (1940), *Topaze* (1951) - he was the first filmmaker to be admitted to the Academy Française), who both tended to view cinema as a means of bringing their dramatic writing to a broader audience. Like Cocteau, however, they largely escaped the opprobrium of younger critics, François Truffaut later asserting that "it was from Cahiers that Gance, Pagnol, Guitry, Rossellini and Ophuls received the most sympathy and gratitude." (Truffaut, 1989, p534-535, from a 1981 letter), arguably because of the textual richness in their work which may have been lacking in much of "*le cinéma de papa*".

Other major European playwrights to dabble in film were Jean Genet, who, under Cocteau's influence, made the dialogue-free, prison-set, homo-erotic short *Un Chant d'amour* in 1950, and Germany's Bertolt Brecht, who co-directed some silent shorts (*Mysterien eines Frisiersalons* (1923), a surrealist experiment made in collaboration with comedian Karl Valentin, and *Mann ist Mann* (1931) - documenting the theatre production of one of his plays), and co-wrote, co-produced, and co-directed the propaganda piece *Kuhle Wampe* (1932)⁵ before fleeing Nazism, and working, largely unproductively, in Hollywood between 1941 and 1947 (documented by Gemünden, 1999).

Both Genet and Brecht were influences on Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who, working in the former West Germany, directed over forty films (including shorts and television mini-series) between 1967 and his death in 1982, his first full-length

⁵ Slatan Dudow is credited as director, but Brecht took charge of one segment - a political discussion in a crowded train carriage).

feature being the crime drama *Love Is Colder Than Death* (1969), his final work being *Querelle* (1982 - an adaptation of Genet's novel *Querelle of Brest*), and intervening projects including the internationally successful World War II drama *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979), and the mammoth TV adaptation of Alfred Doblin's novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980). Fassbinder was the only member of the New German Cinema group of filmmakers (dependent largely on production finance from the television industry, the group also included such figures as Wim Wenders and Werner Herzog) to have worked consistently as a writer, director and actor in the theatre. A number of his early films (most notably *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, 1972) were adaptations of his own plays, and his very first piece for theatre (written in 1965, and not produced until 1985, according to Lennon, 2000), *Water Falls on Burning Rocks*, was successfully adapted for the screen by French director François Ozon in 2000.

Ozon's compatriot, Francis Veber, is perhaps the most successful playwright-filmmaker currently working on the European mainland. His own adaptation of his comic play *Le diner de Cons* (1998) was an international success; an earlier theatrical work was the source material for Billy Wilder's final directorial project, *Buddy*, *Buddy* (1981 - originally the play *Le Contrat*, filmed in France as *L'Emmerdeur* (Edouard Molinaro, 1973)), and a number of films produced in France from his original screenplays have been remade in Hollywood, such as *The Toy* (Richard Donner, 1982), *The Man with One Red Shoe* (Stan Dragoti, 1985), *My Father the Hero* (Steve Miner, 1994), *Father's Day* (Ivan Reitman, 1997) - as well as *Three Fugitives* (1989), directed by Veber himself.

The playwright-filmmaker in Great Britain

It could be argued that Britain's first playwright-filmmaker was Noël Coward, who co-directed the World War II propaganda drama *In Which We Serve* (1943) in collaboration with David Lean. This was his only film as director, however. More productive in this area was fellow actor/writer Peter Ustinov, who wrote and directed a number of films in the 1940s (the wartime drama, *School for Secrets* (1946); body-swap comedy *Vice Versa* (1947); and World War II satire *Private Angelo* (1949), in which he also played the title role), before adapting his best-known play *Romanoff and Juliet*, in 1961; he continued to direct, at sporadic intervals, into the 1980s (*Billy Budd* (1962); *Lady L* (1965); *Hammersmith Is Out* (1972); *Memed My Hawk* (1984)).

The American Film Theatre project, instigated by producer Ely Landau in the early 1970s (outlined by Grode, 2002) was an attempt to bring classic and contemporary plays to the big screen: there were fourteen productions between 1973 and 1975, including Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* (John Frankenheimer, 1973), starring Lee Marvin, Robert Ryan, and Jeff Bridges; and Jean Genet's *The Maids* (Christopher Miles, 1974), starring Glenda Jackson, Susannah York, Vivien Merchant. The only dramatist to take advantage of this project in terms of attempting to direct for the screen was Britain's Harold Pinter, who adapted his stage production of Simon Gray's *Butley* in 1974, starring Alan Bates and Jessica Tandy (Pinter's own *The Homecoming* having been directed, as part of the same series, by Peter Hall, in 1973). Another British playwright who made a film in the early 1970s was Mike Leigh, with an adaptation of his play *Bleak Moments* (1971). His unique methodology (with characters and plot developed through months of improvisation, a script emerging at the end of the process - documented by e.g. O'Mahony, 2002) was

perhaps intimidating to potential financiers, and it was not until the late 1980s that he returned to the big screen with *High Hopes* (1988), followed by a string of high-profile successes such as *Naked* (1993), *Secrets & Lies* (1996), and *Vera Drake* (2004).

Much of Leigh's work has been made under the auspices of the UK's fourth national TV channel, Channel Four, launched in 1982, whose progressive public service remit extended to the production of innovative features intended for both broadcast and theatrical release, and whose successes (generally artistic rather than commercial), contributed significantly to a revival of the industry in Britain. Other playwrights who took advantage of this new environment to develop their filmmaking skills included David Hare with his trilogy *Wetherby* (1985), *Paris by Night* (1988) and *Strapless* (1990); Stephen Poliakoff, with *Hidden City* (1987), and the incest-themed *Close My Eyes* (1991); Hanif Kureishi, writer of the first Channel Four film to become a success at the UK box-office, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985), who directed *London Kills Me* in 1991; Tom Stoppard, who transferred his play *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* to the big screen in 1990; and Steven Berkoff, who did the same with his *Decadence* in 1994. Kenneth Branagh wrote and directed the plays *Tell Me Honestly* (1985) and *Public Enemy* (1987), before embarking upon his series of big-screen Shakespeare adaptations, the first of which, *Henry V* (1989) was produced in conjunction with the BBC. Christopher Hampton, who had previously written *Dangerous Liaisons* for stage and screen (dir. Stephen Frears, 1988), made Bloomsbury Group drama *Carrington* in 1995, and the supernatural political drama *Imagining Argentina* in 2003. John Godber, founder of the Hull Truck Theatre Company, adapted his rugby league-oriented play *Up 'N' Under* for the screen in 1997. In that same year, Welsh playwright Ed Thomas

helped to adapt his play *House of America* (directed by Marc Evans), but while developing a career as a director for television, did not make his first film until the crime drama *Rancid Aluminium*, in 2000. More recently, Jez Butterworth, who remade his 1995 Royal Court Theatre hit *Mojo* as a film in 1997 (featuring Harold Pinter in an acting role), also wrote and directed *Birthday Girl* (2001); Nick Grosso made an adaptation of his 1994 Royal Court success *Peaches* in 2000; and Debbie Isitt, whose feminist farce *The Woman Who Cooked Her Husband* was a hit at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and on the London fringe in the early 1990s, and which has been frequently revived, made her film debut with a version of her play, *Nasty Neighbours* in 2000, and more recently directed semi-improvised comedy *Confetti* (2006).

The playwright-filmmaker in Post-Classical Hollywood

Woody Allen was the first playwright to make a consistent success of filmmaking, in Hollywood's post-classical period. He had had two successes on Broadway, with *Don't Drink the Water* (running from 1966 to 1968⁶ - the play was filmed in 1969, without Allen's involvement (dir. Howard Morris), although he directed a version for American television in 1994) and *Play It Again Sam*, (running from 1969-1970; later filmed in 1972 (dir. Herbert Ross), screen-written by and starring Allen) by the time he wrote and directed crime comedy *Take the Money and Run* in 1969.⁷ His subsequent output has been prolific, new films appearing virtually on an annual basis, while he has continued to write occasionally for theatre (e.g. Allen, 1995).

⁶ This and subsequent Broadway production information obtained from the Internet Broadway Database (www.ibdb.com).

⁷ Although his first credit as director was his re-dubbed comic version of a Japanese spy thriller, re-titled *What's Up, Tiger-Lily* (1966).

On the whole, though, American playwrights' involvement in film-directing has been sporadic. African-American actor-writer Ossie Davis, who had Broadway success with civil rights drama *Purlie Victorious* in the early 1960s, wrote and directed a number of films in the early 1970s, starting with his adaptation of Chester Himes' novel *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970), whose success helped give birth to the "Blaxploitation" cinema. Jason Miller (also an actor, most notably in *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973)) directed the adaptation of his 1973 Pulitzer Prize-winning play *That Championship Season* in 1982 (starring Robert Mitchum and Martin Sheen), and Herb Gardener did the same with his plays *The Goodbye People* (1983) and *I'm Not Rappaport* (1996). Prolific Off-Broadway dramatist John Patrick Shanley, who won the Academy Award for his screenplay for *Moonstruck* (Norman Jewison, 1987), wrote and directed *Joe Versus the Volcano* in 1990 (Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan's first on-screen pairing). Robert Harling, author of the play *Steel Magnolias*, which was filmed in 1989 (dir. Herbert Ross), made *The Evening Star* (1996), the sequel to *Terms Of Endearment* (James L. Brooks, 1983). Sam Shepard has had less success with his own original film projects *Far North* (1988) and *Silent Tongue* (1994) than as an actor (*The Right Stuff* (Philip Kaufman, 1983), *Black Hawk Down* (Ridley Scott, 2001)), a provider of screenplays for other directors (*Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders, 1983)), or a subject for adaptation (*Fool for Love* (Robert Altman, 1985), *Simpatico* (Matthew Warchus, 1999)). More recently, New York dramatist Phyllis Nagy, who made her name in London fringe theatre in the 1990s, wrote and directed the real-life drama *Mrs Harris* (2005 - an H.B.O. production starring Ben Kingsley, Annette Bening and Cloris Leachman, who won an Emmy award for her performance); and Tyler Perry has achieved notable commercial

success with adaptations of his religiously-inflected works aimed at the African-American community, such as *Madea's Family Reunion* (2006).

Perhaps the most important playwright-filmmaker of recent years has been David Mamet. First becoming a force in theatre in the mid-1970s, with *The Duck Variations*, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, and *American Buffalo*, he made his name as a screenwriter with *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Bob Rafelson, 1981), and *The Verdict* (Sidney Lumet, 1982 - for which he received an Academy Award nomination), and saw *Sexual Perversity...* adapted as a Hollywood star vehicle (*About Last Night* (Edward Zwick, 1986), starring Rob Lowe, Demi Moore), before making his directorial debut with the circuitously plotted confidence-trickster drama *House of Games* in 1987, followed by the gentle gangster comedy-drama *Things Change* (1988). He has followed this up with an unbroken series of projects including the adaptation of his controversial play *Oleanna* (1994), the Hitchcockian *The Spanish Prisoner* (1997), and Hollywood satire *State and Main* (2000), whilst continuing to work as a playwright, screenwriter (e.g. *Wag The Dog* (Barry Levinson, 1997), *Hannibal* (Ridley Scott, 2001)) and script doctor. Mamet's influence is discernible in the work of two younger playwright-filmmakers, Neil LaBute and Kenneth Lonergan. LaBute, who has frequently acknowledged the debt to Mamet when interviewed (e.g. in O'Hagan, 2001; Morrison, 2003) began his film career by adapting his own abrasive stage works *In the Company of Men* (1997), and *Your Friends & Neighbors* (1998) within the independent sector, but with *Nurse Betty* (2000), was invited to direct a Hollywood studio picture. Lonergan, whose stage plays *This Is Our Youth* and *Lobby Hero* have successfully played in the West End and across the U.S.A., has worked as a screenwriter on high-profile projects (e.g. *Analyze This* (Harold Ramis, 1999), *Gangs of New York* (Martin Scorsese,

2002)), as well as writing and directing *You Can Count On Me* (2000), for whose role in which, the leading actress, Laura Linney, won an Academy Award.

From the preceding, then, it appears to be the case that there exists a body of work upon which to attempt to base the hypothesis that the playwright may bring a distinctive perspective to the filmmaking process. It would follow from this that investigating the conditions under which certain of these films were made, and interrogating the texts in order to isolate those specific aspects of the theatrical aesthetic which the playwright-director has brought to bear, might be instructive in terms of trying to develop a filmmaking practice which has the dramatist at its centre.

CHAPTER TWO:

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FILM AND THEATRE

The task of delineating the differences between film and theatre has occupied a diverse range of theorists and practitioners throughout the history of their uneasy co-existence as art-forms. Performance theorist Gay McAuley argues that this endeavour is rooted in an essentialist desire to establish the specificity of each (in McAuley, 1987). This work is complicated by the fact that the nature of the relationship between the two forms has constantly shifted as the forms themselves have evolved.

It is clear, for example, that long before the arrival of cinema, theatre artists had aspired to the harmonisation of movement, image, music, design, and literary elements which became the hallmark of film; one need only look at Japanese *kabuki* theatre, for example, in which the revolving stage, making rapid scene-changes possible, was first developed; or Richard Wagner's innovations at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus in the mid-1870s, where, in order to enhance his concept of the operatic *gesamtkunstwerk*, for the first time in theatre, the orchestra was concealed, and the lights dimmed in the auditorium. It might be argued that since the birth of cinema, its gestation as a discrete art form has been contingent on its distancing itself from theatrical approaches to storytelling, whether through technical innovations (e.g. camera movement, computer-generated imaging, etc.) or conceptual shifts (e.g. in respect of naturalistic performance styles, or the centrality of the director).

It is also the case that certain individual projects themselves straddle the divide - there have been a number of theatrical productions which incorporate such

features as pre-recorded film/video back-projections (dating back as far as the agit-prop work of Marxist director Erwin Piscator in the Germany of the 1920s), and “cinematic” visual effects (e.g. a helicopter in *Miss Saigon*, invisibility in *The Invisible Man*, a flooded stage in Ayckbourn’s *Way Upstream*) and a number of well-respected films (discounting, for the moment, those works derived directly from stage-plays) the bulk of whose action consists of conversations taking place in a single location - examples including *Le Gai Savoir* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1968), *Scenes from a Marriage* (Ingmar Bergman, 1973), *My Dinner with Andre* (Louis Malle, 1981), and *Clerks* (Kevin Smith, 1994). On the whole, though, these are perceived as exceptions to the general rule that the essence of theatre is live performance within a dedicated space physically inhabited by both audience and performer(s) - author Aleks Sierz refers to “the cliché that all you need for theatre is two planks and a passion” (Sierz, 1997, p467) - and the essence of cinema is, to quote Bazin, “a denial of any frontiers to action” (Bazin, 1951, p415); unrestricted movement, both of the camera and within the frame.

It has been suggested that the principal difference between acting in theatre and acting in cinema can be summarised in the “truism that a stage actor acts with his voice, while a film actor uses his face” (Monaco, 1981, p33). Any attempt from the perspective of the writer or director, however, to discern those elements of the “theatrical” which are most usefully imported into the cinema, requires a little more investigation. McAuley’s paper helpfully summarises theoretical perspectives on the stage-screen debate in such a way as to clarify the potential for theory to be applied in the development of practice.

A fundamental distinction, from the point of view of both practitioners and analysts, is that while a film can readily be broken down in terms of its basic structural units - shots and scenes - this task is problematic when dealing with plays as performed. While a play-script consists of acts, scenes and transitions, any given performance will comprise almost infinitely variable micro-units, dependent both on decisions made by actors and directors, and on chance factors (lapses of memory, audience reaction, etc.); and each separate production of any given text will contain an entirely different set of variable micro-units, dependent largely on the approach adopted by the director. McAuley notes the lack of agreement amongst performance theorists on respect of dealing with this problem, and goes on to attribute this to the observation that theatre is primarily a spatial art, constructed out of series of physical events occurring within or around a given space, while film is primarily temporal,⁸ the effectiveness of the fragmentation and reconstitution of its elements being determined by practitioners' and audiences' understanding of rhythm, in much the same way as music. This ability to manipulate elements is a positive advantage in respect of maintaining control over the physical point-of-view of the audience; in cinema, the camera is, to a large extent, the narrator. In theatre, on the other hand, one of the director's primary functions is to ensure that audiences do not take advantage of their freedom to let their eyes wander from those areas of the stage where the story is taking place.

Defining the "dramatic" as a mode of story-telling in which events are enacted in the present, and the "narrative" as a mode in which events which have occurred in the past are recounted in the present, McAuley argues that theatre is essentially a dramatic medium, while film is, on the whole, concerned with narrative

⁸ "In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze cites with approval Tarkovsky's statement that in modern film 'time becomes the basis of bases in cinema, like sound in music, like color in painting'" Bogue, 2003, p11.

- although she notes the paradox that in theatre, past events are often recounted in a narrative form (via the monologue), and in cinema, both past and future events are readily dramatised, using flashbacks and flash-forwards. While it is probably more useful to place the two modes at either end of a continuum, rather than to claim that there are immutable distinctions, I would argue that the nature of each medium tends to dictate the type of story which can be most effectively told. Thus, theatre - particularly playwrights' theatre in the Western tradition, which foregrounds dialogue in conjunction with performance - is arguably at its most powerful when it depicts conflict occurring within or between small numbers of protagonists; while most canonical works in narrative cinema make strenuous efforts to show us that characters are overtly acting in meticulously rendered representations of real or fantasy worlds, and that these worlds are acting upon them. The nature of the personal dilemmas they face, however, is essentially the same, the ultimate aim being to reach some kind of resolution.

The long tradition of successful film actors returning to work in theatre,⁹ for a fraction of their Hollywood industry earnings, is a testament not only to a desire to benefit, in terms of career prestige, from theatre's superior cultural capital, but also to the perception that the stage is the ultimate testing-ground for the dramatic performer. In the cinema, the actor is but one of many raw materials, which may or may not be required for a particular project - non-professionals have been frequently utilised by filmmakers seeking unmannered performances and/or striking physiognomic features (e.g. the Italian Neo-Realists, Ken Loach, Larry Clark, the

⁹ Recent instances of which are discussed critically by e.g. Angelique Chrisafis, "West End motto is hooray for Hollywood: As Madonna and Gwyneth Paltrow become the latest US celebrities on the London stage, some query the wisdom of a starstruck philosophy.", *The Guardian*, May 11, 2002, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,4411485-110427,00.html>; Jeremy McCarter, "Starstruck: *The Seagull* demonstrates why Hollywood and Broadway are on separate coasts." *Culturebox*, August 8, 2001, <http://slate.msn.com/id/113296/>.

makers of *Pixote* (Hector Babenco, 1981), and *City of God* (Kátia Lund & Fernando Meirelles, 2002)); animals have played the starring roles in many an adventure story (e.g. *The Incredible Journey* (Fletcher Markle, 1963), *The Adventures of Milo and Otis* (Masanori Hata, 1989)); and several filmmakers (e.g. Godfrey Reggio, Chris Marker) have compiled film narratives consisting largely of land- or city-scapes. The very essence of theatre, however, is the intimacy and intensity of communication between audience and performer which is impossible via other media. Andre Bazin argued that “the stage welcomes every illusion except that of presence” (Bazin, 1951, p408, quoting philosopher Henri Gouhier), and it is the concept of presence which is central to the theatrical experience from the point-of-view of both performer and audience,¹⁰ providing the possibility of a transcendent and mutually transformative encounter - or indeed an embarrassing and disastrous one. As performance theorist and theatre director Herbert Blau puts it: “The theater's actuality is... in the fluent dimensions of the disjuncture between life and theater, in the vulnerability of the acting body” (Blau, 1981, p60). One might argue that it is the very precariousness and unpredictability of live performance which is at the root of its (potentially) galvanising power, and therefore that the key to effective screen acting is the replication or simulation of this communicative immediacy; whether this is achieved via an external, technical approach to performance, internalised Stanislavskyan methods, or pure chance.

The question of cultural capital is an important one in examining the varying attitudes of not only practitioners in film and theatre, but also audiences and scholars. It is not only the fact that the cinematic experience resembles a “waking daydream” (Christian Metz, quoted by Bennett, 1990, p166) which has provoked a vast amount

¹⁰ “In the theatre every reader is involved in the making of the play.” Bennett, 1990, p22.

of psychoanalytically-inflected theoretical work, but also the need to justify the academic study of such a populist form. Bazin argued that theatre-goers “come away with a better conscience” (Bazin, 1951, p410) than cinema audiences, and, writing fifteen years later, on the other side of the Atlantic, cultural critic Susan Sontag noted that theatre-going “smacks of aristocratic taste and class society” Sontag, 1966, p364). Theatre professionals have observed that audiences are more forgiving of unsatisfactory experiences in cinema than theatre, placing the onus for their enjoyment on the form rather than the individual piece. Terry Hands, for example, Artistic Director of Theatr Clwyd, in a comment posted on a theatre-oriented website¹¹ summarised audience attitudes thus: “A bad film and they say: ‘Oh well, better luck next week’. A bad play - and they say ‘I don't like theatre’”; and evidence would appear to suggest that, except in the case of “art-house” cinema (especially if sub-titled), the differences between theatre and film audiences in terms of perceived social and intellectual sophistication tend to persist.¹² Attempting to explain this, Blau refers to the seductiveness of the “vacuous actuality” of film (Blau, 1981, p56), and McAuley asserts that its essence is the distortion of reality to imitate reality, that while it is an abstract, cerebral and artificial form, it presents an image of realism. She suggests that theatre, on the other hand, wears its dualism less lightly, using artifice, ritual and convention, but remaining physical and concrete; thus, as Blau puts it, “certain intellectual operations have to be performed” (Blau, 1981, p60) by

¹¹ Theatre in Wales, www.theatre-wales.co.uk, on 21 November 2005

¹² A 1973 study suggests that habitual theatre-goers were people who were “extraordinarily well educated, whose incomes are very high, who are predominantly in the professions, and who are in their late youth or early middle age” Quoted by Bennett, 1990, p94, who cites a number of studies with similar results across different populations; a recent Gallup poll found that the average Broadway theatre-goer was a college-educated white female in her early to mid-40s (quoted by Robert Libbon, *American Demographics*, February 2001, available online: http://articles.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m4021/is_ISSN_0163-4089/ai_75171030, accessed 09/06/2004). Multiple sources suggest that the average film audience is broadly representative of the population as a whole, although skewing towards under-30s.

the theatre-goer in terms of appreciating that what he/she is seeing is both real and unreal.

Another element of the intellectual divide between theatre and cinema resides in the nature of the texts presented within the two media. “Straight” theatrical drama (i.e. excluding musicals, farces, performance art presentations etc.), often having little to rely on other than the word, often contain long, unbroken stretches of dialogue (and frequently monologue), taxing the concentration of audiences. Such dialogue, in conjunction with the need to project the voice within sizeable auditoriums, also demands the kind of expansive performance which might be perceived as excessive, and even disruptive, in a cinematic context.

In his study of the cinema of John Cassavetes (Berliner, 1999), academic Todd Berliner argues that dialogue in Hollywood cinema is largely governed by five main conventions:

- (a) it serves to either advance the plot or supply pertinent background information;
- (b) it tends to move in a straight line (especially towards one character’s triumph over another in a particular scene);
- (c) characters tend to communicate effectively (listening to one another, saying what they mean);
- (d) characters tend to speak flawlessly; and
- (e) when it fails to follow the previous four rules, it does so for a specific reason (e.g. to highlight tension between characters, or to provide moments of comedy).

Dialogue within text-based theatre, on the other hand - a less plot-driven form than commercial cinema - incorporates all of these modes and several others: the

poetic, for example, or the ostensibly aimless and discursive, or the absurdly non-naturalistic (all of which are features of the work of, for example, Beckett, Pinter and Ionesco). The soliloquy, whether reflective or narrative is also a useful tool, as is silence. The greater number of verbal weapons in the dramatist's armoury, in conjunction with a respect for the single authorial voice which is inherent in Western theatre (as opposed to cinema, where the concept of authorship has long been contentious) allows for a form of textual richness which clearly distinguishes "the play" from "the film", as well as allowing for a more explicit and coherent exploration of political ideas and personal obsessions than is customary within narrative cinema.

In terms of those aspects of the theatrical which might usefully be imported into filmmaking, I would argue that this last point, the question of authorial vision is a central one. Like any sole author, the playwright is able to expound upon complex personal and political themes, with little outside interference; and to experiment, as he/she sees fit with the conventions of narrative and characterisation. A background where one has developed the facility to do this whilst working in an arena where any failure to engage with the audience will quickly become apparent, cannot be anything other than valuable in respect of developing filmmaking practice. Furthermore, on a practical level, the need to work within constraints of cost compels the playwright to learn how to achieve emotional and intellectual effectiveness through the evocative and intelligent use of language, a facility which, in the context of film, may well obviate the need for the complex and expensive manipulation of other cinematographic raw materials (a consideration which would also apply to other

areas of long-established theatrical practice, such as set design and special effects make-up).

During the theatrical rehearsal process, the writer's input is, in general, more valued than on the average film set. Thus, the playwright, even if not a director him/herself is able to gain extensive experience in respect of the process by which an actor develops a character and perfects a performance, often having to alter the text in order to accommodate individual strengths and weaknesses. I would suggest that another area in which theatrical practice has usefully impacted upon filmmaking is in the appreciation of the potency of performative presence - moments in film where performance is able to breach the barrier between screen and audience, drawing the viewer into a profound appreciation of a character's predicament. While it seems impossible to theorise such moments into existence (or indeed, as some interpretations of Brechtian theory might demand, to theorise them out of existence), it may well be useful to consider that in those filmic contexts in which such an effect is required, the writer (and/or actor, and/or director) with experience in theatre might be in a position to facilitate it.

I would suggest, then, that it is these two areas in particular - the expression of a clear authorial vision, and the fostering of performative presence - where the playwright might fruitfully bring his/her particular skills and experience to bear on the filmmaking process. In the context of the practice aspect of this project, therefore, these are the elements on which it would appear to be prudent to concentrate.

CHAPTER THREE:

THE PLAYWRIGHT-FILMMAKER - THEORY AND AUTHORSHIP

In addressing the concept of the dramatist-filmmaker, one is forced to note the gulf between film theory and theatre studies in respect of the concept of authorship. On the one hand, theoretical approaches to both text and performance within text-based theatre appear to affirm the supremacy of the playwright, working on the assumption that the function of the actor, the director, the designer, and even the critic is to serve the writer and the ideas which he/she wishes to convey to the audience. Conversely, those areas of film theory which are based on psychoanalytic, structuralist and post-structuralist thought are dismissive both of the idea of authorial agency in the production of meaning, and of the fixedness of meaning itself.

Barthes' and Foucault's apparent declarations of the death of the author were, of course, not to be taken at face value, since they simply served to point out the multiplicity of subject-positions within the audience for any given work. This could be perceived as a point of convergence with the commercial film industry, since Hollywood's very viability is built on the polysemy of its products, the need to sell the same piece simultaneously to audiences of profoundly divergent backgrounds. It would appear that, similarly, large swathes of opinion within both Theory and Capital, are disdainful of the "romantic" notion of the artist-author in film (as advanced, for examples, by proponents of the Auteur Theory e.g. Sarris, 1962), despite the tacit acknowledgement that the majority of those film texts which are deemed to be of cultural value exhibit the psychological realism and authorial expressivity which, according to David Bordwell (in Bordwell, 1979), is the hallmark of narrative "art cinema".

I would argue that one way of squaring this circle would be to develop theoretical approaches which embrace the disruptive, idiosyncratic elements of authorship, examining it from different perspectives; that of the playwright being a case in point.

The playwright who has had the most impact on theoretical film practice is Bertolt Brecht, despite the fact that, as noted previously, his own involvement in film-making was largely tangential, with the exception of *Kuhle Wampe* (1932) over which he had creative control as co-writer and producer, but only one sequence of which was directed by him (Brecht's co-writer was Ernst Ottwald, and the director was Slatan Dudow; Brecht had no involvement in the film adaptation of his *The Threepenny Opera* (G.W. Pabst, 1932), despite initially agreeing to write the screenplay - he later sued the producers for misappropriation of intellectual property).¹³ His theories of Epic Theatre were highly influential on the avant-garde movement which developed in Europe in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with filmmakers invoking his Alienation Effect (*Verfremdungseffekte*) in works which aimed to challenge Hollywood's illusionism by exposing the artificiality of the form; depriving the viewer of simplistic means of identifying with what was being represented, in the hope of encouraging the development of a revolutionary consciousness. I would suggest, however, that Brecht's theorising has often been interpreted, by film theorists, in a manner which tends to disregard the context in which it was developed - that is to say, his practical experience as a working playwright.

¹³ As reported in, e.g. Bruce Williams, "Preface to G.W.Pabst: The 3 Penny Opera", *Senses of Cinema*, 2000, available online at www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/5/cteq/three.html.

One cannot discount, for example, a careerist motivation behind Brecht's desire to disrupt the cosy, bourgeois sentimentalism of the "culinary theatre" which was prevalent in post-World War One Germany; indeed, his critical and commercial success (with *Baal* and *Drums in the Night* in the early 1920s) pre-dated his formal adoption of Marxism. One could also argue that his theories might be interpreted not necessarily as general aesthetic principles, but as instructions laid down in order to ensure that his plays would always be produced in the way in which he wanted them to be produced; in the case of professional productions to protect the creative ego of the writer from the creative egos of directors and actors; and where his *lehrstücke* - baldly didactic plays designed to be produced and performed by amateurs - were concerned, to provide guidance and protection from criticism for inexperienced practitioners.

Furthermore, it seems clear that Brecht, unlike some of those who followed in his wake, was interested less in formal experimentation for its own sake than in utilising techniques which drew attention to what he was trying to say, such that the social and historical truths which he was attempting to dramatise could be appreciated with an intellectual clarity unclouded by emotionalism. Thus, while later avant-gardists attempted to downgrade the validity of the readily digestible narrative, Brecht saw its value: "Theatre remains theatre, even when it is didactic theatre; and if it is good theatre it will entertain" (from Bertolt Brecht. 'Theatre For Learning', tr. Edith Anderson, 1961 in Martin & Bial, 2000, p27). Indeed, one scholar (Lyon, 1999) argues that Brecht explicitly incorporated elements of the Hollywood film (e.g. a flashback, suspenseful episodes, neat, upbeat narrative closure) into the play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* which he wrote during his sojourn in the U.S.A., in order to enhance its chances of a Broadway production.

Perhaps the most instructive perspectives on Brecht's theorising, however, come from other major playwrights, who have tended to dismiss it. Arthur Miller, for example, has argued that "in his speculative prose, Brecht... called for ... a drying out of script and acting, but except in his most agitprop and forgettable plays he failed or declined to practice this method" (Miller, 1999, p312); while David Mamet describes Brecht's theorising as "problematic", and argues that it is only incidentally related to his ability to create "plays which are extraordinarily charming and beautiful and lyrical and upsetting" (Mamet, 2000, p47).

This apparent dichotomy between the theoretical and artistic mindsets within one individual can readily be extrapolated to the wider context of aesthetic education in many arenas. The challenge, therefore, appears to involve developing theoretical approaches which foreground individual creativity. The approach which I have chosen to adopt involves undertaking case studies of a number of playwrights who have become filmmakers. By examining both the contexts in which their work was produced, and the authorial techniques which they as writer-directors have employed, I aim to demonstrate the extent to which there are aspects of their films whose effectiveness can be directly attributable to their experience as dramatists. My hypothesis is that I will discover features which serve to subvert certain conventions of narrative film and which provide indications of ways in which future playwright-filmmakers can contribute to the development of the form.

CHAPTER FOUR:
PRESTON STURGES
(1898-1959)

The task of placing Preston Sturges in historical context, in respect of the development of commercial film form, is a fairly straightforward one: if, for clarity's sake, we define *auteur* in terms of an individual who combines the functions of sole screenwriter and director, he was, effectively, the Hollywood film industry's first *auteur* of the post-silent-movie era. The aim of this section of my thesis is to attempt to ascertain the extent to which Sturges' experience as a playwright determined both the nature of his working practices, and the form and content of his films, with particular reference to *The Palm Beach Story* (1942).

Sturges was one of many dramatists who were recruited to meet the dialogue needs of sound cinema from the late 1920s onwards. He spent most of the 1930s as a contract screenwriter for Paramount Studios. In later years, he characterised his experience thus:

When I first went to Hollywood, I discovered that directors were treated as Princes of the Blood, whereas writers worked in teams like piano movers. In the beginning I tried to prove that writers were easily as important as directors, then one day I realized that it was easier to become a Prince of the Blood myself than to change a whole social order. (Jacobs, 1990, p10)

Before becoming a director himself, though, and while doing production-line writing on such projects as *The Invisible Man* (James Whale, 1933) and *Imitation of*

Life (John Stahl, 1934), he broke with the standard practice of the time by selling a script written on spec to the studio, earning both an up-front fee, and a percentage of the profits. This project was *The Power and the Glory* (William K. Howard, 1933), a film which Orson Welles acknowledged as a major influence on *Citizen Kane*, released eight years later, in respect of both style (a disjointed structure with extensive use of flashbacks) and subject matter (the life of a recently-deceased tycoon).¹⁴ Sturges was, furthermore, in common with other playwright-screenwriters (e.g. Ben Hecht, Robert Riskin, the team of Garson Kanin and Ruth Gordon), responsible for the development of a genre of films, the dialogue comedy, whose screenplays exerted “far more influence over the film than the director’s ‘auteurial’ style” (Mast, 1979, p249).¹⁵ Prior even to becoming a director, then, I would argue that Sturges was beginning to succeed in his aim of situating the writer at the centre of the filmmaking process.

Sturges’ assertion that “I... did all my directing when I wrote the screenplay”(quoted in Hunt, 1999), suggests that by the time he felt able to assume the role of director, he continued to place the writing process at the core of his practice. Another “theatrical” strategy adopted by Sturges (and, indeed, many other directors), was the creation of a “repertory company” of experienced character actors, such as William Demarest, Robert Dudley and Franklin Pangborn, many of whom he first encountered when they worked on films which he wrote (e.g. both Demarest and Pangborn were in *Easy Living* (Mitchell Leisen, 1937)). Each of them appeared in several of his pieces, where they could presumably be relied upon both to play their relatively small roles with little supervision, allowing Sturges to

¹⁴ “Orson Welles admitted to wearing out a print of *The Power and the Glory* while preparing *Citizen Kane*.” (Jacobs, 1990, p11).

¹⁵ Amongst the earliest of these films were *Twentieth Century* (1934, Howard Hawks), written by Hecht and Charles MacArthur; and *It Happened One Night* (1934, Frank Capra), written by Riskin.

concentrate on his leading actors. They were often utilised as types (e.g. Pangborn was frequently the face of prissy officialdom, Demarest was brash and broadly comedic), providing Sturges with a useful iconic shorthand. Sturges also strove to maintain creative and budgetary control by frequently utilising the same production staff (e.g. producer Paul Jones, editor Stuart Gilmore).

The basis of Sturges' directorial style was his theory of "the natural law of interest" (Sturges, quoted by Payne, not dated), which "came from watching the audiences of his plays. He recalled how they turned their heads en masse to a single point on stage and tried to replicate that point with his camera" (Maza, 1998, unpaginated). This may have led, though, to a tendency towards unimaginative visual composition, as critic/painter Manny Farber argued: "As a maker of pictures in the primary sense of the term, Sturges shows little of the daring and variety that characterizes him as a writer and, on the whole, as a director... Fluent as a whole, his pictures are often clumsy and static in detail" (Farber & Post, 1962, p14). Gerald Mast agrees: "The Sturges emphasis on dialogue determines his film technique, which relies on the conventional American two-shot to capture the faces and features while the characters talk, talk, talk. But it is such good talk - incredibly rapid, crackling, brittle" (Mast, 1979, p266).

Both Farber and Mast argue that it is as a wordsmith that Sturges made his major contribution to cinema, Farber asserting that he "thought up a new type of dialogue by which the audience is fairly showered with words" (Farber & Post, 1962, p13), the wit and sententiousness of his characters both propelling his fast-moving plots, and serving to undermine "the common image of Americans as tight-lipped Hemingwayan creatures who converse in grunting monosyllables and chopped

sentences” (Farber & Post, 1962, p13). Thus, he is not above allowing a butler in *Sullivan’s Travels* (1942) to give bitter vent to his political frustration:

You see, sir, rich people and theorists, who are usually rich people, think of poverty in the negative...as the lack of riches...as disease might be called the lack of health...but it isn’t, sir. Poverty is not the lack of anything, but a positive plague, virulent in itself, contagious as cholera, with filth, criminality, vice and despair as only a few of its symptoms. It is to be stayed away from, even for purposes of study...It is to be shunned.

Similarly, in *The Palm Beach Story*, he puts a wistful poem in the mouth of an elderly, comical millionaire:

Cold are the hands of time that creep along relentlessly, destroying slowly but without pity that which yesterday was young. Alone, our memories resist this disintegration and grow more lovely with the passing years.

The plot of *The Palm Beach Story* sees Gerry (Claudette Colbert) using a monetary gift from this man, a sausage tycoon, to pay the household bills run up by herself and her unsuccessful inventor husband Tom (Joel McCrea), prior to leaving him. Her intention is to travel to the resort of Palm Beach, and find a rich man whom she can marry in order to use his money to finance Tom’s scheme for a revolutionary airport design. On the way to Florida, she hooks up with millionaire John D. Hackensacker III (Rudy Vallee); Tom pursues her, and is wooed by Hackensacker’s much divorced sister, the Princess Centimilia (Mary Astor). The title could be perceived as a reference to *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940), also set

amongst the moneyed classes; the names of the central characters are also presumably meant to call to mind MGM's warring cartoon cat and mouse (whose first short under those names had been released in July 1941). Like all of Sturges' most successful works, it belongs to that most formally disruptive and politically iconoclastic of genres, the comedy, and is a fairly late entry in the cycle of Hollywood "screwball" romantic comedies (e.g. *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938); *Ninotchka*, (Ernst Lubitsch, 1939); as discussed by e.g. Shumway, 1991). At the time of its release *The Palm Beach Story* was less critically well received than most of Sturges' other work (unlike *The Palm Beach Story*, Sturges' *The Lady Eve* (1941), *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944), were all named by both the National Board of Review and the *New York Times* as amongst the best ten films of the years in which they were released (Steinberg, 1981, 181-183, 399)); indeed, New York Times critic Bosley Crowther, a fan of his earlier comedies, was unenthusiastic about the film: "Except for some helter-skelter moments, it is generally slow and garrulous... short on action and very long on trivial talk".¹⁶ As stated in a previous chapter, however, it did feature in the American Film Institute's 2002 poll of the 100 best comedies of the twentieth century, suggesting that the film's reputation has grown in the intervening years.

It seems logical to suppose that, in the same way that silent comedians such as Chaplin and Keaton learnt their technique in music hall and vaudeville, where the sole indicator of effectiveness is the evocation of an audible, physical, participatory response in the audience, Sturges drew on his experience as a playwright when constructing both the verbally and physically comedic elements of the story. As well as one-liners, (e.g. "Men don't get smarter as they grow older, they just lose their

¹⁶ "The Palm Beach Story", *New York Times*, December 11, 1942 (available online – www.nytimes.com).

hair.”; “That's one of the tragedies of this life, that the men who are most in need of a beating up are always enormous.”), the film also contains a number of non-verbal comic set-ups. There is the dialogue-free title sequence, for example, set five years prior to the main plot, which sees two identical Claudette Colberts¹⁷ fighting to make it to the aisle to marry Tom; not to mention the segment featuring the insouciantly gun-happy Ale and Quail Club - a gang of ill-behaved, elderly millionaires who are on the train which takes Gerry from New York to Florida. There are also the reliable, self-congratulatory easy laughs provided by that near-universal staple within theatre, film and literature - the absurd, word-mangling comedy foreigner: Toto (Sig Arno), the Princess' suitor.

Having fought for the right to express his authorial voice, Sturges took advantage of his position to explore themes which interested him. *The Great McGinty* (1940), for example, suggested that corruption was inherent in the political process, and *Sullivan's Travels* satirised both Hollywood's cynical executives, and its would-be radical filmmakers. *The Palm Beach Story* was written in order to illustrate Sturges' theory of the Aristocracy of Beauty - the idea that physically attractive people, especially women, are at an advantage when it comes to achieving success in life;¹⁸ success in rigidly patriarchal societies consisting chiefly of the ability to attract a wealthy husband. Claudette Colbert's character blatantly uses her sexuality in order to achieve her aims (“You have no idea what a long-legged gal can do without doing anything.”), pre-figuring the more overtly sinister *femme fatale* who became an essential feature within the *films noir* of the immediate post-war era.

¹⁷ Exploiting the kind of visual sleight-of hand which is impossible in theatre, but which was already commonplace on film (see e.g. Laurel and Hardy's *Our Relations* (Harry Lachman, 1936)).

¹⁸ An idea which appears to be borne out by empirical research carried out by social psychologists, e.g. Dion et al, 1972, who discovered that people who were considered beautiful were likely to be considered “good”; and Umberson & Hughes, 1987, who found that attractive people had higher status jobs, earned more money, and considered themselves happier than those who were not considered attractive.

While it might be stretching things somewhat to credit Sturges with progressive feminist motives, it seems clear that a story in which a woman attempts to sell herself to one man in order to advance another man's ambitions might have been perceived as an Ibsenesque indictment of sexual inequality had it not been couched in light-comedic Hollywood terms.

Manny Farber also asserted that Sturges was the first post-silent-era director to apply a central modernist principle to cinematic story-telling, "namely, beginning a work of art at the climax and continuing from there" (Farber & Post, 1962, p13). This is certainly the case with *The Palm Beach Story*, with its manic opening sequence, and a romantic comedy narrative which commences with a marriage in crisis. Farber attributes Sturges' consciousness of the modernist aesthetic to his childhood spent travelling around Europe with a culturally active mother, but I would argue that his experience of working in a theatrical environment which saw Broadway productions of works by O'Neill, Shaw and Pirandello must have been equally influential. Another aspect of modernism which is evident in Sturges' films is a scepticism about facile narrative closure, evidenced by the parodic ending to *The Palm Beach Story*, which sees Tom and Gerry reunited, and the Hackensacker siblings conveniently paired off with two *dei ex machina* - Tom and Gerry's identical twins. The willingness to embrace ambiguity is a further modernist principle which resonates throughout Sturges' work; thus in *The Palm Beach Story* he both celebrates and mocks marriage and the idle rich; this same ambivalence being shown towards such ideas as patriotism, war-heroism and maternal love in *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944), and Hollywood populism and bourgeois radicalism in *Sullivan's Travels*.

It would appear, then, that there is evidence that Sturges' background in writing for theatre was a crucial formative influence on his filmmaking style. It seems clear, furthermore, that his experience of working in a field where the single authorial voice was a given served to empower him in respect of imposing a personal artistic vision on this most collaborative of forms, in such a way that his impact has been a lasting one.

CHAPTER FIVE:

DAVID MAMET

(1947-)

It is difficult to over-estimate David Mamet's stature as a playwright. He is considered "one of the most original and important voices not only of his generation but also in the history of American drama, ranking alongside Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, and Sam Shepard" (Alan Piette, 'The 1980s', in Bigsby (Ed.) 2004, p74). From the mid-1970s onwards, his plays have polarised public and critical opinion worldwide, firstly through his exposure of dysfunctional male bonding in pieces such as *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974), *American Buffalo* (1975), *A Life in the Theater* (1977) and *Glengarry Glen Ross* (for which he won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1984), and then through his confrontational treatment of subjects such as "political correctness" on U.S. college campuses in *Oleanna* (1992), and lesbian relationships in *Boston Marriage* (1999).

One of Mamet's most distinctive features as a dramatist is his approach to dialogue: it has been said that his "audacious stylistic breakthrough was, famously, to craft iambic pentameter out of the obscenity-laced vernacular of the underclass" (Mosher, 1996). His characters speak in a manner which reflects naturalistic speech - "the halting staccato delivery, the half-finished sentences, the constipated emotional outbursts" (David Sauer & Janice A. Sauer, 'Misreading Mamet: scholarship and reviews' in Bigsby (Ed.), 2004, p234, quoting critic Jeremy Gerard) - whilst being redolent of verse; as Mamet put it when interviewed in 1984:

It's poetic language. It's not an attempt to capture language as much as it is an attempt to create language. We see this in various periods in

the evolution of American drama. And when it's good, to the most extent it's called realism. All realism means is that the language strikes a responsive chord. The language in my plays is not realistic but poetic. The words sometimes have a musical quality to them. It's language which is tailor-made for the stage. (Quote from Roudane, 1984, not paginated.)

A central aspect of this reflection of reality is that the inhabitants of Mamet's universe typically fail to connect with one another, as scholar Christopher Bigsby puts it: "his characters so often fill the air with speech, speech often designed less to communicate than to avoid communication, less to express meaning than to evade it" (Christopher Bigsby, 'David Mamet', in Bigsby (Ed.) 2004, p16).

It is perhaps his facility with the manipulation of the speech rhythms of blue-collar America which has led to his frequent, lucrative employment as a Hollywood screenwriter-for-hire. His work in this area began with his adaptation of James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Bob Rafelson, 1981 - previously filmed in Hollywood by Tay Garnett in 1946, as well as in France (*Le Dernier Tournant*, 1939, Pierre Chenal) and Italy (*Ossessione*, 1943, Luchino Visconti)), and legal drama *The Verdict* (Sidney Lumet, 1982 - for which Mamet received an Academy Award nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay). His other screenplays include those for crime drama *The Untouchables* (Brian de Palma, 1987), trade unionist bio-pic *Hoffa* (Danny De Vito, 1992), wilderness adventure *The Edge* (Lee Tamahori, 1997), and the political satire *Wag the Dog* (Barry Levinson, 1997 - for which he received his second Oscar nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay); and his other work includes unused early drafts of scripts for *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee, 1992), *Lolita* (Adrian Lyne, 1997) and *Hannibal* (Ridley Scott, 2001).

Mamet's screenplay for the neo-noir con-artist drama *House of Games* (1987) was originally commissioned as a high-profile star vehicle. When the Hollywood production collapsed, however, Mamet decided to direct it himself, as a low-budget project, shot in Seattle, with his then wife (Lindsay Crouse) and other stage actor friends (e.g. Joe Mantegna, William H. Macy, J.T. Walsh, all of whom later went on to build considerable careers as film actors) in the leading roles. While it was not a major commercial success (grossing \$2.5 domestically), it was generally well-received by critics, with Roger Ebert (Ebert, 1987, not paginated) of the *Chicago Sun-Times* describing it as "one of the year's best films", and Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* asserting that the film, "the vision of a secure movie maker, is a wonderfully devious comedy"¹⁹. Mamet has since created a directorial oeuvre which has leant heavily on crime-oriented genres, while gently subverting their conventions. Thus *House of Games* was a noir thriller featuring a naïve female heroine and an *homme fatale*; *Things Change* (1988) was a comparatively warm-hearted Mafia comedy; the police procedural *Homicide* (1991) has anti-Semitism as a theme; *Heist* (2001) was almost parodic in its depiction of multiple double-crosses amongst thieves; and in the political thriller *Spartan* (2004) the hero rescues the President's kidnapped daughter against the President's will. A fascination with crime was also evident in his adaptation of Terence Rattigan's 1946 play, *The Winslow Boy* (1999), in which a middle-class family in Edwardian London sacrifice everything in a bid to salvage the reputation of its youngest child, who has been accused of theft. *State and Main* (2000) was something of an exception, being a relatively gentle satire on Hollywood film-making.

¹⁹ In "Mamet Makes a Debut With House of Games", *The New York Times*, 11th October, 1987, not paginated (available online, www.nytimes.com). The film also won awards at the Venice Film Festival (Golden Osella – Best Screenplay; Pasinetti Award – Best Film), as well as having its screenplay nominated for a Golden Globe.

While Mamet has written the scripts for a number of film adaptations of his own plays (e.g. *Glengarry Glen Ross* (James Foley, 1991), *American Buffalo* (Michael Corrente, 1996)), he has, to date, only directed one: *Oleanna* (1995). Since Mamet, primarily a playwright, also works as a novelist, essayist, social commentator, theatre theorist, poet, and writer of stories for children, it might be suggested that he views the writing of screenplays as simply another outlet for his creative imagination, with its own set of principles to be followed. It may also be the case that he perceives the making of films both as an extension of his writing - with the added advantage of retaining the same degree of control over the text that he enjoys as a playwright and theatre director - and as an academic exercise; indeed, he began lecturing on filmmaking having only directed two films, these lectures forming the basis of his book *On Directing Film* (1992). When interviewed on the release of *Heist*, Mamet remarked: “ I think genres are what American film does best. The cowboy film. The love story. The film noir. The gangster film. And they present a wonderful challenge because the form is so strict.”²⁰ Given that his work in theatre tends, on the whole, to defy easy generic classification, this would appear to indicate that, for all his insistence that whatever medium he chooses to work in he is “just a storyteller” (quote from Roudane, 1984, not paginated), there is a clear dichotomy between Mamet the contentious playwright and Mamet the playful filmmaker; in his thesis, academic Bruce Barton discusses “the transgressive volatility of Mamet's theatrical exhibitionism and the voyeuristic passivity encouraged by his work for film” (Barton, 1994, piii).

I would suggest that Mamet’s most significant contribution as a film director has been to create a series of distinctive works within which he has been able to

²⁰ From “Mamet's on a Classic Caper: 'Heist' revels in the love of genre.” Devin Gordon, *Newsweek*, November 19, 2001 (available online: www.newsweek.com)

reflect not only his literary style and personal preoccupations, but also his theoretical perspectives on performance and on the purpose of art. I will attempt to illustrate this with particular reference to his fifth film, *The Spanish Prisoner* (1997).

“The Spanish Prisoner” is the name given to the confidence trick in which the victim is enticed to entrust a complete stranger with a relatively small amount of money (or, in the case of its current e-mail based incarnation, the details of one’s bank account) in return for the promise of both an exponentially larger sum, and the knowledge that one has contributed to the correcting of an injustice.²¹ The film’s narrative centres around Joe Ross (Campbell Scott), who works for a large corporation, and has invented a secret formula - The Process - which will earn them a vast amount of money, but for which he fears he will not be adequately recompensed. The means by which he is inevitably relieved of it involves a complex series of deceptions, situating Ross in a Kafkaesque world (Corliss, 1998, notes that the hero of Kafka’s *The Trial* - German title *Der Prozess* - is also named Josef) where he discovers that he can trust no-one, and that nothing is what it seems. Whilst none of Mamet’s films as director has been spectacularly successful at the box-office, *The Spanish Prisoner* grossed a respectable \$9.5million in the U.S., after its release in the spring of 1998,²² and was Mamet’s most commercially successful film until *Heist* (2001), which grossed \$23.5 million domestically. It received generally good reviews, with Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* asserting that it was “his

²¹ “It is the oldest confidence game on the books. The Spanish Prisoner... Fellow says, him and his sister, wealthy refugees, left a fortune in the Home Country, he got out, girl and the money stuck in Spain. Here is her most beautiful portrait. And he needs money to get her and the fortune out. Man who supplies the money gets the fortune and the girl. Oldest con in the world.” Quote from *The Spanish Prisoner* (Mamet, 1997).

²² Comparing well with other “arthouse”-marketed films of that year, such as *American History X* (Tony Kaye, 1998), which grossed \$6.7 million; and *Pi* (Darren Aronofsky, 1998), which grossed \$3.5 million (information from e.g. www.imdb.com, www.boxofficeguru.com).

sleekest and most engaging film thus far”²³ and Roger Ebert of *The Chicago Sun-Times* describing it as “delightful in the way a great card manipulator is delightful” (Ebert, 1998, not paginated) - a reference to actor/magician Ricky Jay, who has appeared in most of Mamet’s films.

While in the arena of theatre criticism, the term “Mametian” is applied to those dramatists who appear to ape Mamet’s dialogue style, it has entered popular-critical filmic discourse as shorthand for circuitous plotting which has interpersonal deception as its motor; for example, in his review of the DVD of Argentinian film *Nueve Reinas* (*Nine Queens* - (Fabián Bielinsky, 2000), for the *Amazon* retail website, film critic and historian Philip Kemp describes it as “a movie very much in the Mametian mould”). In *The Spanish Prisoner* (as in *House of Games* and *Heist*) deceptiveness operates in the service of greed (a favoured theme within Mamet’s plays, in particular *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *American Buffalo*) in a story which concerns itself with “the violation of trust, the betrayal of friendship and the exchange of love (or, at least, its potential) for profit” (McIntyre, 1998, not paginated). Its central plot-line recalls that of an early play, *The Water Engine*, in which a naïve young inventor’s revolutionary brainchild is stolen and suppressed to serve the interests of Capital. Mamet pointedly refuses to explain what The Process might be, in a self-consciously overt reference to the Hitchcockian concept of the “MacGuffin”, that item or concept which drives the plot;²⁴ as Mamet says:

It is sufficient for the protagonist-author to know the worth of the MacGuffin. The less specific the qualities of the MacGuffin are, the more interested the audience will be. Why? Because a loose

²³ In ‘Film Review: From Mamet. A Con Game. Secrets. Very Complicated.’, *The New York Times*, April 3rd, 1998, not paginated (available online, www.nytimes.com).

²⁴ Mamet’s use of the MacGuffin in his films is comprehensively discussed by Digou, 2003.

abstraction allows audience members to project their own desires onto an essentially featureless goal. (Mamet, 2002, p29.)

Thus, all we need to know is that *The Process* will allow the corporation (again, we are given no clues as to the sector of the economy in which it operates) such complete control of the global market that it is prepared to construct an elaborate confidence trick in order to secure it. The fact that it also resorts to murder is almost incidental - perhaps a given. Mindful of the cliché, "You can't con an honest man", Mamet paints Ross as a character who is flawed as well as sympathetic. "The hero of my film wants to be thought well of; he feels he's not getting what he deserves from his employers."²⁵ He is also sufficiently vain both to rebuff the unsubtle advances of lowly secretary Susan - played by Rebecca Pidgeon (who, as well as being Mamet's second wife, has also originated a number of roles in his stage plays, e.g. *Oleanna*, *Boston Marriage*) - and to be flattered by the attention paid to him by charismatic and mysterious millionaire Julian "Jimmy" Dell - played by comedian Steve Martin - whom they meet during a company trip to a Caribbean island.

The aspect of Mamet's films which most disconcerts both critics and audiences is the replication of his theatrical dialogue style.²⁶ While, in the more formally inclusive arena of theatre, the Mamet style (like the Pinter style,²⁷ or the Beckett style) is accepted in its own terms, in the context of Hollywood cinema, it becomes a disruptive technique, serving to enhance the audience's awareness that, within the frame, roles are being assumed and games played. The following

²⁵ From an interview on the film's official website, www.sonypictures.com/classics/spanishprisoner/interview.html.

²⁶ E.g. "Lindsay Crouse, unfortunately, only draws your attention to the fact that nobody ever, ever talks this way." Hal Hinson, reviewing *House of Games*, December 19th, 1987, *Washington Post* (available online: www.washingtonpost.com)

²⁷ Harold Pinter is an obvious influence on his style; Pinter was instrumental in ensuring that *Glengarry Glen Ross* had its world premiere in London in 1983.

exchange, for example, takes place as Joe is attempting to negotiate with his boss,
Klein (Ben Gazzara):

Lawyer 1: Well, this is purely a formality.

Lawyer 2: Before any announcements, before...

Klein: We want to be certain that the Process, Joe...

Ross: Yes?

Klein: That any uncertainty about.... about...

Lawyer 1: About any outstanding...

Lawyer 2: Look, there are several questions involved.

Ross: Yes, what are they?

Lawyer 2: Questions of security.

Ross: There are no questions of security!

The fact that the only person making unequivocal statements here is Ross, serves to underline the point that he is the only honest person in the room. On the other hand, when confronting Dell over a missed dinner appointment, it is Ross who equivocates ("I didn't... I didn't... look... look... look... I didn't... look... I didn't want to intrude."), suggesting that in this situation it is he who in a position of moral weakness, hankering as he is after the millionaire's lifestyle - and his sister. One scholar has criticised Mamet for "the extent to which educated or streetwise characters are forced to sound incoherent to lend plausibility to their ignorant, self-destructive actions" (Weber, 2000, p139), although, as he concedes, the creation of characters with flaws which are invisible to them but obvious to an audience has been inherent in the work of tragic dramatists from Sophocles onwards.

Mamet, however, also utilises characters who speak with excessive deliberation to achieve different effects. Ross' work colleague - played by Ricky Jay - speaks almost entirely in proverbs and quotations (e.g. "We must never forget that we are human, and as humans we must dream, and when we dream we dream of money."; "Worry is like interest paid in advance on a debt which never comes due.") which serve to create an air of self-conscious mystery and vague untrustworthiness; he is also a lawyer - a group often subject to jibes at the hands of Mamet.²⁸ Thus, when he is found murdered, in a manner which implicates Ross, both we and he are shocked to realise not only the depths to which the conspirators are prepared to sink, but also that he has lost his one true, honest friend. On the other hand, the equally articulate Susan is aggressively quirky (using cutely nonsensical phrases like "Shows to go ya!" and "Dog my cats!") but also forthright and unambiguous ("I'm a hell of a person. I'm loyal and true and I'm not too hard to look at, what do you think?"; "If you ever feel the need of some company. Or you'd like someone to cook you dinner. Or dinner and breakfast.") We then share Ross' disorientation when this apparent embodiment of one film noir type, the nurturing, good girl, is finally revealed as another - a *femme fatale* of the most cold and ruthless kind ("Nobody lives forever, the important thing is to enjoy yourself. Kill him.")

Inherent to Mamet's style as a writer and director in both film and theatre is his theory of Practical Aesthetics. In terms of directing, this involves telling a story in as simple a manner as possible: "Always do things the least interesting way, and you make a better movie... because then you will not stand the risk of falling afoul of the objective in the scene" (Mamet, 1992, p20). This reductive approach is often

²⁸ In *The Edge*, after a millionaire, played by Anthony Hopkins, has killed a wild bear that has been menacing him in the wilderness, his colleague points out that, "A month ago, old Smokey here would've reared up, you probably would've called your lawyer!"; Hopkins character replies: "Nah, I wouldn't do *that* to an animal."

perceived in negative terms by critics: for example, in his review of *The Spanish Prisoner*, David Denby suggests that “Mamet has to learn to trust the camera more than he does; he has to stop trying to control everything with language; he has to let loose a little and just give in to the fluency, the ease, the free-flowing pleasure of making a movie” (Denby, 1998, not paginated). It may simply be, however, that Mamet, the most recognisable of screenwriters, has made the choice not to draw attention to himself as a director.

In respect of performance, Mamet is similarly disdainful of ostentation, arguing, essentially, that the actor’s sole function is to “learn the lines, find a simple objective like that indicated by the author, speak the lines clearly in an attempt to achieve that objective” (Mamet, 1998, p57); that the only textual analysis which is of any value is that which helps the actor by uncovering the intentions of the author; and that performance theories which stress internalisation, such as the Stanislavskyan approach, are of little use: “If we learn to think solely in terms of the objective, all concerns of belief, feeling, emotion, characterization, substitution, become irrelevant”(Mamet, 1998, p82). He argues that: “There is no character. There are just lines on the page.” (Mamet, 1998, p52); and that “the emotions should take place in the audience. It just doesn’t have to be dealt with from the actor’s viewpoint” (Mamet quoted by Don B. Wilmeth, in ‘Mamet and the actor’, in Bigsby (Ed.) 2004, p144). Mamet’s is a perspective with its origins both in his experience as a teacher of drama, and his needs as a writer, and it may be the case that (perhaps in the Brechtian tradition) he has constructed a theoretical position whose ultimate aim is to enable him to retain control over his texts wherever and whenever they are performed. Actors who have embraced Practical Aesthetics, however, argue that focussing solely on the motivations inherent in the text is helpful: “just listen to somebody and

respond honestly, I think, is the key to truthful and compelling performances” (Actor David Wenham, quoted in Bancks, 2003, not paginated).

Mamet has written of his distaste for histrionics, and his respect for performances whose hallmark is restraint (citing, for example, Celia Johnson and Noël Coward in *In Which We Serve* (Noël Coward, David Lean, 1942), and Henry Fonda and Larry Hagman in *Fail-Safe* (Sidney Lumet, 1964), in Mamet, 2003a). The performances in his own films, however, routinely irritate critics, one of them suggesting that *The Spanish Prisoner* “sounds and looks at times as if it’s a ‘Robotic Theater Production’”.²⁹ While this apparent stiltedness serves both to disrupt audience expectations, and to draw attention to the fact that his characters are playing games (not necessarily very well), it is also clear some actors are able to make Mamet’s poetic dialogue appear utterly naturalistic, and their characters’ motivations entirely opaque. In the case of *The Spanish Prisoner*, for example, I would single out Ben Gazzara and Steve Martin, both of whom were working with Mamet for the first time. This would suggest that Mamet has imported from the theatre the notion that, when appropriate, experienced performers with innate ability should be allowed to find their own routes into a character; when interviewed during the shooting of *The Spanish Prisoner*, Martin gave no indication that Mamet the director (as opposed to Mamet the writer) was constricting his freedom to interpret the role as he chose: “I get to play a bad guy... you play the bad guy essentially the same way you play a funny, good guy. What’s fun is the audience knows you’re bad, which makes your nice, surface persona just all the more heinous.”³⁰

As well as stage-plays, Mamet has also directed magic shows starring Ricky Jay. This fascination with theatrical sleight-of-hand is given free rein in *The Spanish*

²⁹ Jeff Vice, *Deseret Morning News*, Friday May 8th, 1998 (available online: www.deseretnews.com).

³⁰ Martin quoted in ‘Star of stage: Amid raves for his ‘Picasso,’ Martin continues as playwright’, Bill Zwecker, *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 20, 1996, p3.

Prisoner, its entire plot analogous to a conjuring trick (with a façade of normality concealing highly complicated mechanisms, intended to deceive), and vital moments hinging on the concept of misdirection, as the audience is made to see events unfold through the eyes of the hero, before realising, with him, the extent of the deception to which he is being subjected. Thus, we see a lavish apartment block which, turns out, in fact, to be a derelict building; an exclusive gentlemen's dining club which, it transpires, is simply an ordinary restaurant; and the application form for membership of said club which he signs, only to be later informed that the document is actually an incriminating request for political asylum in Venezuela (here the filmmaker blatantly cheats, showing us a different sheet of paper on each occasion). Only towards the end of the film is the audience allowed to see things which Ross does not, such as a fire-arm placed in his hand-luggage in order to alert airport security as to his presence, and impromptu conferences between Susan and a fake police officer. Finally, at the dénouement, we realise that the frequent, apparently random and dismissive references to Japanese tourists (and Japanese business rivals) which have been scattered throughout the film, are anything but random; they are playful clues as to the identity of Ross' eventual rescuers.

Mamet is provocatively critical of dramatists who write "problem plays" with the aim of effecting social change, arguing that:

The good play will not concern itself with cares - however much they occupy us day-to-day - that can be dealt with rationally. Drama doesn't need to affect people's behaviour. There's a great and very, very effective tool that changes people's attitudes and makes them see the world in a new way. It's called a gun. (Mamet, 1998, p25.)

According to Mamet, “the theatre exists to deal with problems of the soul, with the mysteries of human life, not with its quotidian calamities” (Mamet, 1998, p27). Thus, while much of his work might be perceived as expressing a political viewpoint (e.g. the criticism of capitalist ethics apparent in *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*, what appears to be the call for an aggressive response to anti-Semitism in his film *Homicide* (1994)), he always strives to avoid the evocation of simplistic, self-congratulatory responses in his audiences (“I *knew* that homosexuals, blacks, Jews, women were people too. And, lo, my perceptions have been proved correct.” (Mamet, 1998, p15), and is disdainful of the manipulateness which is inherent to melodrama (“In these false dramas we indulge a desire to feel superior to events, to history, in short, to the natural order” (Mamet, 1998, p15)). Notably in this regard, he criticised Steven Spielberg for making *Schindler’s List* (1993), describing it as “emotional pornography” (quoted in Christopher Bigsby’s ‘David Mamet’, in Bigsby (Ed.) 2004, p16), and arguing that “attempts to picture Jews going to the gas chambers are exploitative, even if they’re done for the best reasons in the world” (Mamet interviewed in Covington, 1997, not paginated). Productions of *Oleanna*, ostensibly a “problem” play in which a university professor’s career is ruined by a false accusation of sexual harassment from a female student, saw (presumably) liberal audiences cheering as the male “victim” struck the female “victim” in the final moments, and Mamet has said of these characters “I think they’re absolutely both wrong, and they’re absolutely both right” (Mamet quoted by Brenda Murphy in ‘Oleanna: language and power’, in Bigsby (Ed.) 2004, p125). This desire to embrace complexity and ambiguity is central to his philosophy of the purpose of art: “We live in an extraordinarily debauched, interesting, savage world, where things really don’t come out even. The purpose of true drama is to help remind us of that” (Mamet,

1998, p20-21). While *The Spanish Prisoner* is a conscious *hommage* to Hitchcock, its very refusal, for example, to explain the nature of The Process, or exactly how the notebook in which Ross has written details of it manages to be stolen when he never once appears to let it out of his sight,³¹ or why Susan smiles as she is being bundled into the police van at the end of the film, indicates that even whilst working within the fantasy universe of the populist *noir* thriller, Mamet remains a dramatist who is reluctant to provide easy answers.

I would argue, then, in respect of Mamet's contribution to cinema, that while his films have rarely crossed over to the mass audience, or been unanimously acclaimed by critics, he has shown that it is possible for a playwright to transfer his techniques and concerns between the two dramatic media. He has also proved himself adept at manipulating generic elements in such a way as to elucidate his theoretical perspectives on the purpose of his art. While his cinematic oeuvre may not be as historically significant as those of previous playwright-filmmakers, it does at least indicate that it is possible for a "serious" artist to open up a space within commercial film practice in which to produce subtly transgressive work.

³¹ One of several dislocatory plot holes which greatly exercises members of *Spanish Prisoner* discussion groups on the Internet (e.g. on the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com)).

CHAPTER SIX:
PRACTICAL PROJECTS
NO. 1 - "THE BEAUTY"

The first film produced as part of the current project was a 3-minute short entitled "The Beauty", starring Cardiff-based actor Michael Kelligan.

In developing the first digital video project in support of my thesis, I felt it was important to retain an element of simplicity, not simply because of the limited resources available, my inexperience as a filmmaker, and the need to maintain practical control of the project; but also in terms of the theoretical considerations which I was hoping to explore. The first stage, then, was the construction of a short script as a blueprint for a film in which performative presence and clear authorial expressivity could be readily foregrounded.

The obvious solution was a brief, dramatic monologue, to be delivered direct to camera. In order to render it some way conventionally filmic, however, I felt that, rather than a purely discursive piece, or poetic recitation, there had to be a narrative, dramatic element involved. It was also important that the piece not be entirely static, in order to take advantage of the filmmaker's ability to control the physical viewpoint of the audience. The idea of making it context-specific was adopted as a way of further distancing it from the artificiality of the theatrical experience.

Principles derived from my research into the work of the playwright-filmmakers thus far subjected to case-study were applied in the scriptwriting process. From Preston Sturges came the notion of making the directing process inherent to the screen-writing process; writing a screenplay which contains a logical sequence of camera moves, and which also through dialogue, narrative and context, exerts a

decisive degree of control over the parameters within which performance and characterisation can be pitched. From David Mamet came the idea that the style of directing should be dependent on the logic inherent in the narrative; in the case of a fairly straightforward story, the central principle being to simply point the camera at the central elements, and trust that the standard of writing and performance will be sufficient to maintain the attention of the audience. The script for “The Beauty” was thus developed with these considerations in mind.

“The Beauty” can be synthesised as follows: we hear a disturbance in a public toilet, and a young man rushes out, making clear eye-contact with the camera-operative/bystander/audience before escaping. We hurry into the toilet, to see a man in late middle age lying on the floor - he has been physically assaulted. It appears that he has been violently rebuffed after making sexual advances towards the young man. The central protagonist, however, is too embarrassed to admit this, at first; although his subsequent musings, first on the unfairness of his predicament, and then, optimistically, on the beauty he sees in contemporary youth, make it clear that he is resigned to his fate. In the final section, he asks to be left alone, to recover his composure in solitude.

The central directorial conceit of the piece involves consciously situating the camera in the role of bystander: we witness the assailant’s exasperation and the older man’s discomfiture, we lend the victim a handkerchief with which to wipe his bloody nose, we listen to his story, we retreat diplomatically when requested to. My aim was to exploit the intimacy of both the cinematic close-up and theatrical performance, in order to maximise the audience’s involvement in the narrative.

Had constraints of time and economics been less pressing, the film would have been a one-take project; in the event, however, two takes were combined in order to cover a technical error (four takes having been shot in total, in the space of 30 minutes). Other manipulation of cinematic elements involved the use of accelerated motion to convey panicky apprehension as the bystander enters the toilet, and the use of slow-motion and freeze-frame at the end, to dramatise the central protagonist's emotional torment. Non-diegetic music was also utilised - a section of the first movement of a Bach Sonata for solo violin, placed over the opening credits in order to provide a sense of anticipation, and provide a contrast with the violence which we hear; and repeated at the very end, this time to illustrate the older man's isolation.

In retrospect, it seems obvious that the quality of the piece would have been enhanced had I had access to a full crew, in order that the lighting, camera work and sound reproduction be of a professional standard; and that more time at the disposal of all concerned would have resulted in both a more extensive rehearsal period, and a far greater number of takes to choose from.

From the theoretical standpoint, it seems clear that the use of the dramatic monologue, a tool whose potency has been recognised by authors from Sophocles onwards, is potentially fertile ground for playwright-filmmakers, especially if they choose, as I did, to conform to the standards of the form as elucidated by scholars of Victorian poets such as Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson (e.g. Everett, 1991), that is to say that the reader (or viewer) explicitly takes the part of the silent listener, that the speaker is clearly making some kind of case using an argumentative tone, and that dramatic tension lies in the audience's perception of a gap between what is

being said and what is being revealed. While I could have chosen, during the editing process, to explicitly illustrate the protagonist's plight using, for example, inter-cut scenes from his daily existence or images of attractive people, my decision to maintain focus on the performer was, I felt, vindicated by the strength of the performance, the subtle pathos exhibited bringing life to the text, which had been constructed in such a way as to express the poignancy of the character's plight, whilst leaving space for the audience to come to their own conclusions as to the precise nature of the events depicted. The decision, at the scripting stage, not to make extensive use of post-production processing resulted, to my mind, in a disciplined approach to the writing process, producing a piece whose site-specificity was an essential element, and whose brevity was a virtue. Other filmmakers choosing to exploit the robustness of the monologue form might well make other choices, with efficacious results, especially given the relatively orthodoxy-free arena which is the three-minute short.

My feeling, then, is that "The Beauty" was relatively effective in highlighting those elements of theatricality within film which were its intended focus, i.e. immediacy of performance, and the primacy of carefully constructed dialogue. Furthermore, the experience of making it provided a useful springboard in terms of ascertaining practical and theoretical options when developing a second, more ambitious film project.

CHAPTER SEVEN:
PRACTICAL PROJECTS
NO. 2 - “MY ENEMY’S ENEMY”

The obvious logical progression from “The Beauty” was a project which, similarly, foregrounded performative presence and clear authorial expressivity, but on a larger scale. The experience of making this first film, however, focussed my mind on two wider filmic issues: the possibilities inherent in the use of the long take; and the realisation that “The Beauty” appeared to share common features with works belonging to the “*Dogme 95*” movement. It seemed sensible to investigate these areas before shaping my second piece.

In the earliest days of cinema, the long take was the norm, given the non-portability of film-making equipment, and the theatrical origins of many of its participants. The development of montage editing, most notably by Eisenstein and Griffith, was a vital step in the evolution of the grammar of cinema. Nevertheless, the long take has remained a vital element within the filmmaker’s armoury. While there are notable examples of its being employed as a self-conscious expression of directorial virtuosity by directors who revel in the mobility of the camera (e.g. Orson Welles, *Touch of Evil* (1958); Martin Scorsese, *Goodfellas* (1990); Robert Altman, *The Player* (1992)), there are also those, such as Jim Jarmusch, Peter Greenaway and Abbas Kiraostami, who employ the static long take in the service of Bazinian realism (“Andre Bazin considered the long take essential... only long takes could produce a sense of contemplation and openness to the world.” Fulford, 2001, not paginated),

not to mention Jean-Luc Godard, who uses the long, slow, tracking shot in a manner which tends to subvert it (as discussed by Henderson, 1970).

Attempts to maintain the long take throughout the length of an entire feature are rare. A notable example of recent years is Mike Figgis' *Timecode* (2000), which relates a real-time narrative from the point-of-view of four cameras, presented to us via a four-way split-screen effect, with actors improvising their dialogue around a predetermined structure. While there was critical unanimity over its status as a technical tour-de-force, there was less of a consensus over the effectiveness of the central story, which involved infidelity amongst a group of film executives and actors, culminating in murder.³² Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2002), on the other hand - whose tagline read: "2000 Actors. 300 years of Russian History. 33 Rooms at the Hermitage Museum. 3 Live Orchestras. 1 Single Continuous Shot." - was generally received with greater warmth,³³ perhaps because, as one reviewer put it, "*this* approach is fundamentally appropriate and illuminating for *this* subject" (Graffy, 2003).

Classical Hollywood's sole attempt at a one-take feature-length piece was Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), an adaptation of a Patrick Hamilton play in which two young men, having murdered an acquaintance as an experiment in Nietzschean philosophy, host a dinner party for his family and friends; the Hitchcockian MacGuffin being the corpse concealed in a trunk in full view of everyone. Shot in series of eight-minute takes, it was edited in such a way as to give the impression of

³² E.g. "In *Timecode* the story is upstaged by the method... and a viewer not interested in the method is likely to be underwhelmed." Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 28th 2000 (available at <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com>); on the contrary, the Sight and Sound reviewer argues that "on the whole *Timecode* synchronises its high-wire act with aplomb: technically, this is a virtuoso piece of work. More crucially, the film succeeds on a dramatic level." (Brooks, 2000, p37).

³³ E.g. "The film is a glorious experience to witness... If cinema is sometimes dreamlike, then every edit is an awakening. *Russian Ark* spins a daydream made of centuries." Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*, January 31st 2003 (available at <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com>)

unbroken continuity. It received lukewarm reviews at the time of release, one critic suggesting that “the unpunctuated flow of image becomes quite monotonous... the yarn, by the nature of its writing, is largely actionless.”³⁴ Hitchcock himself later suggested that it had been a failed experiment, telling François Truffaut in the 1960s that “I really don’t know how I came to indulge in *Rope*”.³⁵ Nevertheless, academic V.F. Perkins considered it an effective piece, suggesting that “the claustrophobia which Hitchcock creates by closing in the décor is an essential part of our experience of the film” (Perkins, 1972, p89). Most instructively, from my perspective, he makes the point that “Hitchcock’s ability to impose an area of interest is contingent on that area’s being or quite rapidly becoming as important to us as his treatment assumes” (Perkins, 1972, p130).

It becomes clear, then, that it is incumbent on a filmmaker who aims to exploit the possibilities of the long take to ensure that there is enough happening within the frame to justify its use; i.e. that the nature of the content substantiates choices made in respect of form.

The Ten rules of *Dogme 95* were developed, along with a manifesto decrying “the cinema of illusion”,³⁶ by Danish filmmakers Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg. The rules are as follows:

1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).

³⁴ “Rope: An Exercise in Suspense Directed by Alfred Hitchcock”, Bosley Crowther, *New York Times*, August 17, 1948 (available online – www.nytimes.com).

³⁵ Quoted in “Hitchcock’s Rope: A Stunt To Behold”, Vincent Canby, *New York Times*, June 3, 1984 (available online – www.nytimes.com).

³⁶ From the official *Dogme 95* website (www.Dogme95.dk/)

2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot).
3. The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place).
4. The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable.
5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.
6. The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)
7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)
8. Genre movies are not acceptable.
9. The film format must be Academy 35 mm (i.e. an aspect ratio of 4:3.)
10. The director must not be credited.

Both directors have made it clear that *Dogme 95* (often referred to as the 1990s equivalent, in terms of its impact on film form, of the French New Wave of forty years previously, e.g. by Schlosser, 2000; Gilbey, 2002) was developed in a spirit of playfulness,³⁷ its aim being to place creatively fruitful constraints on directors who were accustomed to working according to standard industry practice. From the very beginning, however, the filmmakers broke their own rules, with Vinterberg manipulating the light in *Festen* (1998 [the first *Dogme* film, i.e. *Dogme*

³⁷ "Seriousness and play goes hand in hand. A clear example of this is that the very strict and serious *Dogme 95* Manifesto was actually written in only 25 minutes and under continuous bursts of merry laughter." From the official *Dogme 95* website, quote not ascribed.

#1/), Von Trier using an unseen background musician on *The Idiots* (1998 - *Dogme* #2), and neither seeking to remove his name from the credit-rolls of their films. It is clear, however, that the rules were not intended as a set of Stalinist injunctions. The objective was, rather, to inspire debate about the filmmaking process, and to contribute to the breaking of what were perceived as bad cinematic habits; as Vinterberg put it: “*Dogme 95* is my attempt to undress film, to reach the ‘naked film’.... while nearly all other film-making instruments have been stripped away what remain are the two most essential of instruments to a director, the story and the acting talent.” (Thomas Vinterberg quoted on the official *Dogme 95* website.)

This “back-to-basics” approach, and the consequent concentration on starkly rendered interpersonal interaction rather than superficial, technologically-enhanced spectacle invites comparisons with stage drama, in respect both of the “liveness” of the production process,³⁸ and the nature of the finished article;³⁹ indeed, *Festen* has been successfully adapted for the stage in several countries, including a West End version by playwright David Eldridge, in 2004.

I would thus argue that the attention paid, within *Dogme*, to writing and performance reflects similar aims, in terms of a visual story-telling aesthetic, to those which I have outlined in reference to a playwrights’ cinema. Furthermore, while short films are excluded from official *Dogme 95* certification, it is clear that “*The Beauty*” conformed to most of its rules (although music was added, and a minimal amount of rudimentary optical work was done). Nevertheless, while considering options for a second film project, I quickly realised that working within a broader

³⁸ “... because there is no sound editing (overlaps, dissolves ...), everyone must be present on stage (for background sound, for example), which turns the shooting into a theatrical process.” Schlosser, 2000, not paginated.

³⁹ “... because *Dogme*’s strictures focus attention back on to character and dialogue, many of its best films are melodramas with an intimacy and emotional power usually found in the theatre” Spencer (2005), reviewing the last “official” *Dogme* film (*Dogme* #34), *In Your Hands* (Annette K. Olsen, 2003).

thematic context would necessitate abandoning, to a large extent, Von Trier and Vinterberg's notional constraints.

The screenplay for my second film had its genesis in the desire to create a piece where the claustrophobia engendered by the long take was inherent to the narrative; and where this narrative was sufficiently rich to sustain the unbroken focus of the camera. It was also important that the examination of an intense personal relationship of some kind be at the centre, this being not only a feature of the *Dogme* films, but also a recurrent theme within my writing. The desire to address political issues in a manner which embraced ambiguity, as per the Mametian ethic, was also significant.

Thus "My Enemy's Enemy" is a two-hander set in a prison cell in a Fascist dictatorship, inspired by a specific place and historical moment - Saddam Hussein's Iraq on the eve of the 2003 invasion. The plot sees the prisoner, a bourgeois, left-wing journalist who has been detained for defaming the Head of State, teased, taunted, threatened and harangued by his proletarian captor who, his experience tells him, may well have been sent to execute him. In the event, it transpires that the guard is simply giving vent to her frustrations before freeing him, as ordered - a reference to Saddam's tactic of emptying his jails prior to war. The fact that the prison guard is female, that both protagonists are Caucasian, and that the dictator is referred to as "El Presidente" tends to lift the piece into the realms of metaphor, to the extent that at least one viewer of the piece has likened it to media coverage of post-war events at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, even though its subject was the more widespread and systematic abuse which took place in such detention centres in the years prior to the removal of Saddam. This illustrates not only the extent to which contextual factors

can affect audience reception of work, but also the tendency of an ambiguous, “theatrical” approach to script-writing to ensure a broad range of interpretations around a particular theme.

Given that the intention was always to film the piece in one take, “My Enemy’s Enemy” was written, in the first instance, as though it were a short stage-play, in the tradition of the topical 10-minute play (see Mitchell, 2003). The shooting script was then developed following a textual analysis whose objective was to ensure that the audience’s point-of-view was contingent on developments in the narrative - following the Mametian injunction to point the camera at the story. Thus, if the “story” was deemed, at a given point, to “be” the horrified expression of the Prisoner, the unhappy demeanour of the Guard, or the nature of the physical interaction between the two characters, the movement of the camera should reflect this.

Even before the first draft of the screenplay was written, it was clear that the film would, through necessity, contravene Rules 1 and 7 of *Dogme* - the prison cell would have to be recreated within a local theatre space. Once the film had been shot (three takes of the piece were recorded, the final version being deemed the most successful, and forming the basis of the final cut), other contraventions occurred: for example, although no music was added, the absence of an external microphone during the shoot meant that the sound had to be computer-enhanced in order that the dialogue be audible; creative choices pertaining to the visual impact of the scenario involved reducing the light levels and stretching the image to the 16:9 aspect ratio during post-production; and the one instance of relatively minor violence might be perceived as “superficial action”.

While the tradition of the “filmed play” is, as was noted earlier, as old as cinema itself, I feel that conceptualising “My Enemy’s Enemy” as a film to be shot in one take - rather than as a piece for theatre, or a film to be produced under the conventions of shot/reverse-shot continuity editing - led to a disciplined, stripped-down approach to the writing process, and a piece whose hallmark is dramatic tension between two driven characters whose motivations gradually become apparent in a recognisable and naturalistically realised context. Under ideal conditions, it would have been shot in a studio with broadcast-quality sound-recording facilities, and I would have been able to work through the detailed camera movements outlined in my shooting-script with an experienced cinematographer, rather than having to operate the camera myself. Nevertheless, my familiarity with the script enabled me to anticipate where the “story” would be at each moment, and attempt to capture it within the frame. I would thus argue that a methodology of this nature would be better suited to screenplays which were narrative-oriented rather than reflective in tone. The physical and psychological demands inherent in this approach to directing and performance would, however, mean that adopting it routinely might be impractical for pieces of greater length and formal complexity, especially where resources were limited.

If the experience of making “The Beauty” and “My Enemy’s Enemy” can be described in terms of data-collection, using a grounded theory⁴⁰ approach to research, then one might be expected to develop a theoretical position in respect of the discoveries made. It seemed appropriate, therefore, to create a list of principles with

⁴⁰ Theory that is developed inductively from a corpus of data (see e.g. Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

regard to the particular form of “playwrights cinema” which I was aiming to explore.

The “rules” which I derived as a result of my work are as follows:

THE “LIVE CINEMA”⁴¹ MANIFESTO:

1. The piece should be rehearsed and blocked as would a stage-play.
2. Each scene should be shot in one take (or appear to be so).
3. Each scene should contain narrative progression, such that a non-speaker of the language should be able to discern that the lives of the protagonists are changing.
4. The dramatic context of the piece, naturalistic or otherwise, should be convincingly rendered via decor and performance.
5. To the extent that they do not utterly undermine the intentions of the script, minor errors by the actors should remain in the finished piece.
6. The role of the director is to ensure that, at all times, the eye of the audience is focussed on the story.

⁴¹ A term sometimes used as a description of the *Dogme* films, by e.g. Schlosser, 2000.

7. The role of the editor is to enhance sound, image and mood, and to preserve the integrity of text and performance.
8. The writer's vision is paramount.

Like the *Dogme 95* manifesto, these “rules” should be read not as prescriptive with regard to cinema as a whole. Rather, they refer specifically to work which aims, whatever themes it chooses to address, to resonate on a humanistic level by replicating the intensity of live theatre, and to achieve its effects through potent writing and performance rather than post-production processing. The intention is that they should provide a focus for the discussion of the filmmaking process, particularly from the viewpoint of the dramatist, and constitute a fertile basis for further practical investigation.

Prior to embarking upon a third film project, I felt that it would be helpful to carry out further case-studies in order to attempt to find evidence for the applicability of such a “manifesto”. The dramatist-filmmakers I chose to research at this stage were Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Neil LaBute.

CHAPTER EIGHT:
RAINER WERNER FASSBINDER
(1945-1982)

As stated earlier, Rainer Werner Fassbinder was not only one of the most prominent members of the 1970s generation of West German filmmakers, but also a notable figure in theatre; an interest he only pursued after failing to gain entry to Berlin Film School, and making a number of amateur shorts. Having joined Munich's radical Action Theatre in 1967, he reconstituted it a few months later as his own "Anti-Theatre" (*Antiteater*), directing and acting, as well as writing a number of plays, adaptations of four of which - *Katzelmacher* (1969), *The American Soldier* (*Der Amerikanische Soldat*, 1970), *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (*Die Bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant*, 1972), and *Bremen Freedom* (*Bremer Freiheit*, 1972) - were amongst his earliest works for the screen.

His first feature-length film, however, *Love Is Colder Than Death* (1969), although made with his Anti-Theatre colleagues, was a crime drama, and the influence of Hollywood genres - particularly *film noir* and female-oriented melodrama - was evident throughout his career. When questioned as to his choice of story for his debut feature, Fassbinder (in an interview by with Joachim von Mengershausen, included in Töteberg & Lensing, 1992, p2) said:

I meant to send a message. I could always make a film that would have everything in it that this film has for me, but in a completely different form. That would be a problem film, I guess. I chose a crime plot because that kind of story is easy to tell.

This suggests that, like many American filmmakers before him (“The gangster is the ‘no’ to that great American ‘yes’ which is stamped so big over our official culture.” Warshow, 1954, p435), he valued this particular genre as a means of discussing social injustice.

Katzelmacher, Fassbinder’s first play to be produced by the Anti-Theatre was overtly politically themed. The title is a Bavarian pejorative aimed at immigrants, implying that they have the sexual morals of tom-cats; and the narrative details the violent reactions of a group of young Germans to a Greek guest-worker (*gastarbeiter*), played on both stage and screen by Fassbinder himself. The play betrays the influence of cinema, with its naturalistic dialogue and 48 short scenes. Fassbinder’s willingness to embrace ambiguity, however, more usually a feature of theatrical than cinematic writing, is already evident: Jorgos, the immigrant, although innocent of the rape of which he is accused, is seen to be sexually exploitative of his German girlfriend, and, despite being a victim of racist violence, he himself makes anti-Turkish comments. This refusal to over-simplify was to earn Fassbinder much criticism in the politically troubled West Germany of the 1970s.⁴²

One of Fassbinder’s trademark themes was the abuse of power within personal relationships, portrayed in such a way that it is impossible not to read it as a metaphorical representation of broader political tensions, as Fassbinder himself intimated (“I don’t make any films which aren’t political” (Franklin, 1986, p141 - a quote from 1975). This was manifest in such films as *Fox and his Friends* (1975), in which a working-class gay man is systematically relieved of his lottery winnings by a newly-acquired bourgeois-capitalist lover. It received a subtler treatment in perhaps the best-known of Fassbinder’s early “theatrical” films *The Bitter Tears of Petra von*

⁴² Cf *The Third Generation* (*Die Dritte Generation*, 1979), in which ideology-deficient middle-class terrorists are unwittingly financed by capitalists, in order to exploit public concern and help maintain the status quo; a thesis which attracted criticism from all sides of the political spectrum.

Kant (1972). In this piece, a successful female fashion-designer develops a sexual obsession with Karin, a beautiful but vacuous young model, which leads to the older woman's emotional collapse. Fassbinder made no attempt to open out his play for the big screen, making a virtue of its claustrophobic setting (the central character's luxurious apartment) as a means of highlighting the hot-house intensity of the dysfunctional relationships he was presenting. He did, however, alter the ending: as the play concludes, a chastened Petra reaches out emotionally to Marlene, her mute, downtrodden and exploited amanuensis. In the film adaptation, Marlene responds to this unaccustomed kindness by walking out on her abuser; reflecting the extent to which Fassbinder felt that women were complicit in their own oppression.⁴³

In the film which I intend to discuss in greater detail, *Ali - Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), the central relationship is threatened by both internal and external tensions. Shot on a low budget, over a four-week period, it went on to win the International Critics' Award at the Cannes Film Festival. Inspired by German-born Hollywood director Douglas Sirk's 1955 romantic melodrama *All That Heaven Allows* (the two films are compared and contrasted by Reimer, 1996), in which a wealthy widow (Jane Wyman) falls in love with a gardener several years her junior (Rock Hudson), Fassbinder's story sees Emmi (Brigitte Mira), an office-cleaner in her sixties, start a romance with Ali (El Hedi ben Salem), a Moroccan guest-worker aged around forty; escaping from the rain on her way home from work, she comes into the bar which he and his friends frequent; they jokingly dare him to ask her to dance, he does, and a relationship ensues. In Sirk's film, the heroine has to contend with the disapproval of her adult children, and moneyed social circle; Fassbinder, additionally, has his

⁴³ "... on the one hand women are oppressed, but in my opinion they also provoke this oppression as a result of their position in society and in turn use it as a terror tactic." Fassbinder, quoted in an interview about his "women's films" Töteberg & Lensing, 1992, p149.

characters explicitly face the condemnatory glare of a society where racism is endemic (as does American writer-director Todd Haynes, in his 1950s-set take on Sirk's original, *Far From Heaven* (2002)).

If Fassbinder can be described as a “state-of-the-nation” film artist, I would argue that it is his experience as a playwright which enabled him to effectively dramatise and humanise the issues he wished to portray, rather than resorting to abstraction or overt didacticism, like many of his contemporaries. Reviewing *Fear Eats the Soul* at the time, for example, Laura Mulvey remarked on the central characters' situation within the broader politico-economic context thus: “the two protagonists belong to the main sectors of casual, unorganised labour that capitalist society depends on but refuses to recognise as an integral part of the work-force” (Mulvey, 1991, p47); and Thomas Elsaesser describes their predicament in terms of the Grand Theoretical/psychoanalytic notion of the “gaze”⁴⁴. If Ali and Emmi succeed in coming across as anything other than schematic representations of political concepts, however - thus enabling the audience to identify and empathise with them - it is because of creative choices made by Fassbinder the dramatist.

The shifting power-dynamics within relationships, a recurring theme within Fassbinder's oeuvre, is illustrated in *Fear Eats the Soul* by the rapid slide in Ali's status; when the relationship begins, his sexuality, the only area in which he is perceived to have status in the circles in which he moves, is the dominant force; by the end of the film, however, he has been, to all intents and purposes, emasculated by the pressures he is under. Another of Fassbinder's bugbears, the German

⁴⁴ “Ali and Emmi suffer from social ostracism because of a liaison that is considered a breach of decorum. But the way it presents itself is as a contradiction: the couple cannot be ‘seen together,’ because there is no social space (work, leisure, family) in which they are not objects of extremely aggressive, hostile, disapproving gazes (neighbours, shop-keepers, bartenders). Yet conversely, they discover that they cannot exist without being seen by others, for when they are alone, the mutually sustaining gaze is not enough to confer or confirm a sense of identity.” Elsaesser, 1980, p48.

predisposition towards the kind of conformism which results in Fascism ("I'm interested in showing how the Germans... are predisposed in such a way that the idea of fascism... can lead them to something like National Socialism." Fassbinder, from an interview in Töteberg & Lensing, 1992, p46) is reflected near the end of the story when, despite her experience of racism, Emmi finds herself joining her work-colleagues in marginalizing Yolanda, a Yugoslavian guest-worker. Fassbinder's belief that this tendency is inherent within the fabric of "Germanness", rather than something imposed from above by authoritarian forces, or a reaction to traumatic events (the attack on Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists at the 1972 Munich Olympics is referred to as a reason for not trusting Turks), is illustrated early on, when Emmi's neighbours attempt to persuade two policemen to join their conspiracy against the couple, receiving short shrift - one woman speaks nostalgically about "the old days" (i.e. the Nazi era), when policemen didn't have long hair.

Fassbinder's complex attitude towards capitalism is also reflected. Many of his works (e.g. *Katzelmacher*, *The Merchant of Four Seasons* (1971) *Bremer Freiheit*, *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1978)) contain scenes which meticulously detail the central character's calculations of his/her financial position; *Fear Eats the Soul* is no exception, Emmi being seen to tot up the impact which the marrying of her and Ali's meagre finances will have on their lives (it is also interesting to note that one of Emmi's colleagues is later sacked for stealing an adding-machine). This suggests a lack of naivety in respect of monetary matters, consistent with Fassbinder's position as a prolific, low-budget filmmaker with a background in the notoriously impoverished arena of fringe theatre; this is displayed in the narrative, when racist objections to Emmi and Ali's union fall away as their economic usefulness - as unpaid baby-sitter, as manual labourer, as customers in a grocery-

store faced with competition from a nearby supermarket - becomes the priority of those around them. Fassbinder also displays his ambivalence by portraying “good” or rather, morally neutral capitalism in the person of Emmi’s landlord, who only objects to Ali’s presence in Emmi’s apartment when he thinks he is a lodger, rather than a partner (and rent-payer) - he later refuses to join her neighbours in condemning the relationship (“I can’t see anything indecent about it.”); and “bad” capitalism, embodied by Emmi’s unseen employers, who in lieu of giving the cleaners a pay-rise, appease them by employing someone - Yolanda - who is paid less than them.

Given the avowed simplicity of Fassbinder’s tale, and his command of the grammar of film, it is quite possible for the non-German-speaker to follow the storyline of *Fear Eats the Soul* even without the benefit of subtitles.⁴⁵ The language he uses, nevertheless, might be said to be more theatrical than conventionally cinematic, frequently evoking mood and nuances of character, rather than serving to propel the narrative. The pre-credits epigraph “DAS GLÜCK IST NICHT IMMER LUSTIG” (“Happiness is not always fun”) is an obvious attempt to set the tone of the ensuing parable. The film’s German title, *Angst Essen Seele Auf*, taken from a line of Ali’s dialogue, can be literally translated as “Fear Eat Soul Up”, reflecting his imperfect but evocative command of his adopted language; his stoical complaint that he is discouraged from using his real name - El Hedi ben Salem M'Barek Mohammed Mustapha - in this new land provides evidence that his efforts to communicate on a meaningful level are not, on the whole, reciprocated. The casualness and lack of irony with which Emmi notes that the restaurant to which she takes Ali after their wedding ceremony was one of Hitler’s favourites points up her insensitivity; his lack of verbal reaction underlines the extent to which the impassivity with which he is

⁴⁵ “Basically, the perfect movie doesn’t have any dialogue. So you should always be striving to make a silent movie.” Mamet, 1992, p72.

forced to greet his daily trials has become ingrained in his very being. Throughout the film, though, the simplicity of Fassbinder's dialogue serves to illustrate the point that in a better world the solutions to their problems would be equally simple: "When we're together, we must be nice to each other", says Emmi, towards the end of the film, during a brief respite from marital strife, immediately before Ali dramatically falls victim to a stress-related illness.

A number of critics point out that victimhood and masochism are recurring motifs within Fassbinder's work. Richard Dyer, for example, suggests that "the propensity for victims, while it may well be expressive of compassion or pity, is enmeshed in a visual and narrative rhetoric that bespeaks and tends to reinforce a bourgeois patriarchal way of seeing - that is, thinking and feeling about - the oppressed" (Dyer, 'Reading Fassbinder's Sexual Politics', in Rayns (Ed.) 1979, p58). Fassbinder, however, argued that his aim in presenting such issues in an ostensibly simplistic context, the narrative of *Fear Eats the Soul* being a case in point, was not to provide political solutions, but rather, to encourage audiences to develop their own: "My goal is to reveal such mechanisms in a way that makes people realise the necessity of changing their own reality" (Fassbinder quoted in Rayns (Ed.) 1979, p93). This is reminiscent of Brecht's avowed aim of presenting "the truth" in such a way that the audience recognises the necessity of demanding social change.⁴⁶

Fassbinder's approach to performance might also be described as Brechtian, the acting styles adopted by both Brigitte Mira and El Hedi ben Salem being minimalistic, the actors required to recite their lines in order to elucidate the issues being illustrated, rather than embody their characters. It could be suggested that Fassbinder took advantage of the fact that both lead actors had limited experience in

⁴⁶ "People shouldn't do things like that. - That's extremely odd, almost unbelievable. - This has to stop." Brecht's conception of the theatre-goer's ideal response to his Epic Theatre, quoted in Martin & Bial, 2000, p26.

dramatic roles - the bulk of Mira's lengthy career had been spent in musical theatre and boulevard comedies, and Ben Salem only ever acted under Fassbinder's supervision (the only film not directed by Fassbinder in which he appeared was Ulli Lommel's *The Tenderness of Wolves* (*Die Zärtlichkeit der Wölfe*, 1973), which was produced by Fassbinder), "Ali" being his biggest role. Both performers, however, would have had reason to identify closely with their "outsider" characters: Mira, whose father had been Jewish (she survived the Third Reich by living on false papers, according to Rorrison, 2005), and who was in a relationship with a younger man at the time of shooting (according to Fassbinder, interviewed in Töteberg & Lensing, 1992, p13); and Ben Salem as a recent immigrant, involved in a socially marginalised liaison (with Fassbinder - some critics (e.g. Ebert, 1997; Clark, 2005) comment on Fassbinder's physical similarity to Mira - short, overweight, not conventionally attractive). He in particular gives a stiff, inexpressive reading of his role, the director perhaps playing on his stiltedness (and the fact that his voice was, according to the film's entry in the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com), dubbed by a German actor) to exploit the impression of "otherness". Fassbinder said:

I've never worked with film actors the way I worked those with those two in *Fear Eats the Soul*. I shot every take ten, fifteen, even twenty times, which I've never done before; this time I really wanted to get the maximum out of every moment. (From an interview in Töteberg & Lensing, 1992, p14.)

This suggests that the final results closely reflected his intentions in terms of maintaining a distance between performer and character. Thus when expressions of raw emotion are required - for example, when Emmi bursts into tears at the

unfairness of their ostracism, or Ali screams in agony as he collapses with a perforated stomach ulcer - they carry all the more impact for being infrequent.

I would argue that a clear legacy of Fassbinder's experience as a playwright is in the disjunctive, episodic structure of many of his films, which seem to be explicitly divided into "acts", each of which tells a particular segment of the story, leaving the audience to do the work of filling in the gaps. Little sense is given, in *Fear Eats the Soul*, of the development of Emmi and Ali's relationship from initial attraction to marriage - there is no "bliss montage" (a sequence of musically underscored images, depicting the new lovers laughing together, on outings, at dances, etc., described by Basinger, 1994, p8) as is customary in the Hollywood "women's pictures" from which he drew his inspiration. When a workmate calls round to ask Emmi a favour, and meets Ali for the first time, we are almost as surprised as she when Emmi mentions that they have been married for three months. Most jarring of all, after Emmi and Ali return from a brief holiday, taken in order to give them some relief from the derision of their peers, they suddenly find themselves ostensibly accepted, and the story enters a phase in which the focus is on the internal dynamics of their relationship. This leads to a conclusion in which Fassbinder pointedly resists simplistic narrative closure of either the happy or tragic varieties, suggesting that life will go on, more or less unsatisfactorily.

One of Fassbinder's filmic trademarks is his use of framing - characters seen as imprisoned in doorways, behind lattices, etc; understandable given that one of the principal themes across his body of work is the troubled/troublesome individual trapped by societal convention ("Fassbinder remained preoccupied with the individual's (often futile) struggles against the social and economic forces that preclude the realisation of his or her desires." Hake, 2002, p156), but perhaps over-

exploited on occasion - Emmi is frequently seen “caged” behind the bars on the stairwells of her home and her workplace; although, towards the end, her place there is taken by her marginalised Yugoslavian work-colleague. It is employed most inventively in conjunction with the tableau, a more theatrically-oriented effect in which we are shown figures frozen in - or meticulously forming themselves into - barely mobile, emotionally-charged, painterly poses at telling points within the narrative. Possibly the most striking of these moments occurs when Emmi and Ali are the sole customers in an open-air bistro, and we cut to a shot of six members of staff, gathered in the doorway, glaring at the mismatched couple with undisguised contempt on their faces - part of the climactic scene in which the isolation and hostility she is facing cause Emmi to publicly break down. Another important scene comes during another crisis in their relationship, when Ali - after Emmi has shown disrespect for his cultural heritage by refusing to cook him couscous (“In Germany, people don’t eat couscous!”) - returns to the comforting arms of the parodically blowsy blonde bar-owner (played by Barbara Valentin, an actress once described as the German equivalent of Jayne Mansfield) who was part of the group who prompted him to dance with Emmi in the first place. He unenthusiastically strips naked, framed in a brightly-lit doorway; Barbara, the girl, joins him, turns out the light, and falls with him onto her bed, where they lie, apparently immobile, united in despair rather than lust.

While long, silent takes of this kind are common throughout *Fear Eats the Soul*, it must be supposed that it is ben Salem’s inexperience which resulted in a smaller number of conventionally theatrical, unbroken, dialogue-oriented scenes than

is customary within Fassbinder's film works.⁴⁷ Once again, their relative infrequency maximises their potency, such as during the outdoor bistro scene, when Ali asks Emmi why she is crying. She replies:

Because I'm so happy. Yet I can hardly stand it. The way people hate us, all of them. If only you and I were alone in the world. I always act as if I didn't care. But I do, I do care. It's killing me. No-one looks you in the face. They all smirk. They're all swine. Dirty swine, all of them.

Redolent though these words may be of any "outsider"-oriented critique of any society, it is difficult not to read them as reflective of Fassbinder's experience as a flamboyantly gay man in a nation with a history of conformist authoritarianism, despite his much-documented refusal to play the role of victim in his own life.

I would argue, then, that had Rainer Werner Fassbinder not been a playwright, his work in cinema would have been less distinctive and less personal than it was, and therefore less potent and influential. The theatre gave him the opportunity to learn how to effectively manipulate performers, text, and mise-en-scène, and to play with the preconceptions and expectations of audiences. He also gained authorial experience in an arena where it is an expectation that important issues will be addressed, and where any failure to engage with these on a human level becomes apparent with an unforgiving immediacy.

⁴⁷ "The stylization of Fassbinder's long, static takes in which we are confronted by the cold, silent stares of his characters prevents total emotional involvement with the characters." Franklin, 1986, p142.

CHAPTER NINE:

NEIL LABUTE

(1963-)

Perhaps the most significant, and certainly the most prolific dramatist-filmmaker to have emerged within the past decade is Neil LaBute. The strength of his reputation as a playwright, on both sides of the Atlantic, post-dates the success of his first two independent films, *In the Company of Men* (1997), and *Your Friends & Neighbors* (1998), themselves based on early plays.

LaBute's focus is the micro-political; indeed, like Mamet, he has written of his distaste for political theatre of the agit-prop variety.⁴⁸ He is known for abrasive and merciless depictions of a world in which people exhibit extreme emotional cruelty in pursuit of power and gratification within personal relationships. Interviewed shortly after the release of his second film, he summarised his worldview thus:

If we don't continually evaluate and re-evaluate ourselves, we fall into patterns and believe that what we're doing is right. You fall into movements where no-one questions the company line. That's how fascism began. We have to constantly look at the ways we deal with each other. (Dickson, 1998, not paginated.)

His plays, many of whose premises might be described as "high-concept", include *The Shape of Things* (first performed 2001), in which a troubled young woman seduces and physically and psychologically reshapes a young man, as an art

48 "Don't like what's going on in the Middle East? Write a letter or lead a rally or make a cutting remark in the Times about it. So what? Big deal. Bully for you. As far as I'm concerned, if you don't have *The Crucible* [Arthur Miller] or *Via Dolorosa* [David Hare] or *Pentecost* [David Edgar] up your sleeve, keep your damn ideas to yourself." LaBute, 2003, not paginated.

project; *The Mercy Seat* (2002), a two-hander, whose male protagonist contemplates exploiting the terrorist attacks on New York on September 11th 2001, as a means of escaping from his marriage; *Fat Pig* (2004), whose hero's romance with an overweight woman is subverted by his body-fascist friends; *Some Girl(s)* (2005), whose central character, a man on the verge of marriage, revisits four old girlfriends in order to try and assuage his guilt at having ruthlessly terminated the relationships; and *This is How it Goes* (2005) in which a man returns to his home town in order to break up the marriage of his high-school sweetheart to an African-American.

As a filmmaker, LaBute has sought to establish a broad thematic focus, whilst developing his directorial skills on the more expansive canvas provided by cinema. Thus, prior to adapting *The Shape of Things* for the screen (in 2003), he made two films based on source material provided by others: the romantic comedy-thriller *Nurse Betty* (2000 - its star, Renee Zellweger, was awarded the Best Actress (Musical/Comedy) Golden Globe for her performance), an assignment which he accepted as a hired hand; and *Possession* (2002), based on the novel by A.S. Byatt. His most recent project was *The Wicker Man* (2006) a critically reviled remake of the British paganism-oriented horror thriller (Robin Hardy, 1973).

LaBute's laconic dialogue style, and his predilection for exploration of the most cynical elements of human nature has led to frequent comparisons with Harold Pinter and David Mamet,⁴⁹ and he makes no effort to conceal his artistic influences. *This is How it Goes* was dedicated to Pinter, *Fat Pig* to Mamet,⁵⁰ and the name of his

⁴⁹ E.g. "LaBute favours long takes where the characters vent their spleen. The effect isn't uncinematic exactly, but it's close enough to dramaturgy to suggest one probable antecedent: David Mamet. His plays carry a similar charge of bravura nastiness and feel just as remote from life." Matthews, 1998, p36.

⁵⁰ Labute's quote about his devotion to Mamet - "beyond fan - stalker perhaps. Psychological stalker" - is frequently cited (e.g. by Brown, 2002; Romney, 2004); interviewed by Morrison, 2003, he mentions but does not name a Mamet play which he attempted to adapt for the screen.

production company, Contemptible, is taken from the English title of Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris* (1963).

Another influence is his background as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (a.k.a. the Mormons), to which he converted whilst studying theatre at Brigham Young University in Utah, where he also made the acquaintance of long-time collaborator, actor Aaron Eckhart. While his relationship with the Church has been a difficult one - he was "disfellowshipped" (the step prior to excommunication) following the controversy over his collection of performance pieces entitled *bash - latterday plays*, in one of which a Mormon graphically describes his beating-up of a gay man, and by early 2005, had formally terminated his membership⁵¹ - several journalists have discerned a moral purpose in his portrayal of individuals who are blatantly sinful; a purpose which LaBute does not deny:

Mormons, [LaBute] says, hold firm views about art and its purpose.

'They feel that if you are a Mormon, what you should do with art is glorify and exemplify and be positive, and not create characters - be they Mormon or not - who run counter to that.' They do not, in short, believe that good can come from showing what is bad. 'As I do.'

(Interview by Brown, 2002.)

In the Company of Men (a title shared with a 1989 Mamet essay) was shot over a period of eleven days, on an initial budget of \$25,000.⁵² It went on to win the Filmmakers' Trophy at the Sundance Festival, and Best Screenplay at the

⁵¹ Information from Labute's entry on a Latterday Saints film website (www.lsdffilm.com/directors/LaBute.html).

⁵² The original investment came from two friends of LaBute's who had received an insurance pay-out following a motor-accident; post-production, the budget rose to \$250,000 (information from various sources, e.g. Meyer, 1997; Dickson, 1998).

Independent Spirit Awards, was named Best First Film of the year by the New York Film Critics Circle, and made the “Top Ten Films of 1997” lists in publications such as *Time Magazine*, *Rolling Stone*, *The New York Times* and *Entertainment Weekly*. Its domestic box office take of \$2.8 million was unspectacular, but respectable given its budget, and limited release.⁵³

The plotline is as follows: two executives for an unnamed corporation, Chad (Aaron Eckhart) and Howard (Matt Molloy), working on a six-week project away from home, decide to gain symbolic revenge on all the women who have hurt them. Chad’s idea is to select a vulnerable female, then romance and abandon her: “It’s a simple story: boys meet girl, boys crush girl, boys giggle.”⁵⁴ They choose Christine (Stacy Edwards), a hearing-impaired secretary. As the scheme progresses, the weaker Howard begins to develop feelings for Christine, who has fallen in love with the brasher and more conventionally handsome Chad. In the end, however, after Chad rejects her, it transpires that his primary aim has been to distract Howard while he usurps his superior position in the corporation.

On its U.S. release in August 1997, *In the Company of Men* had an impact which far outweighed its position in the marketplace, critic John Simon, in an otherwise dismissive assessment, acknowledging that “no film within recent memory has aroused more public and private discussion” (Simon, 1997, not paginated.) With many contemporaneous reviewers (e.g. Stein, 1997; Hicks, 1997; Garner, 1997) not mentioning the careerism-oriented plot-twist, the focus was on the misogyny of the male protagonists, and the film’s profile was boosted by a number of press articles addressing its divisive impact upon audiences (“Women find it hateful; men find it embarrassing”, said one reviewer – Hicks, 1997, not paginated) at a time when (with

⁵³ A maximum of 119 screens, according to the website www.boxofficeguru.com.

⁵⁴ LaBute, from a promotional interview on the film’s official website, www.sonypictures.com/classics/men/interview.html.

the issues of gays in the military and the alleged sexual misdemeanours of President Clinton in the forefront of the American consciousness) masculinity was perceived to be in crisis (see e.g. Wartofsky, 1997; Fuller, 1997; Sharrett, 1998).

LaBute has made it clear that, in his opinion, the artistic success of *In the Company of Men* is attributable to the fact that he approached it as though it were a play: “lots of rehearsal, shot in long takes, very static camera” (LaBute, 2004, not paginated). He notes that “I have never balked at watching what you might call talking heads, as long as the talk is good and the person doing it is expert at it” (LaBute interviewed by Morrison, 2003, not paginated). As we have seen from the work of other playwright-filmmakers, a methodology of this kind places the focus squarely on the quality of the writing and performances, in the absence of other distractions as regards cinematic spectacle. In respect of LaBute’s work, this leads to the foregrounding of the central element of his authorial style - the tendency to paint in broad strokes, utilising extreme scenarios, unsubtle characterisations, and exceptionally vivid dialogue, in the service of a heightened, confrontational naturalism.

The film’s opening sequence is an opening-out of a lengthy conversation between Chad and Howard, commencing after Howard has emerged from a public toilet, having been examining a bruise caused by a woman who has slapped him, apparently taking offence at his simply asking her the time. This incident, along with discussion of the recent endings of both of their relationships, is the starting point for a discussion, dominated by Chad (and continuing as we follow them from the airport’s departure lounge, via the plane, a rental car, the hotel bar, to the hallway outside their hotel rooms), whose main foci are the way in which the balance between the sexes has shifted, to the detriment of men (“Women - nice ones, the

most frigid of the race, it doesn't matter in the end. Inside they're all the same meat and gristle and hatred, just simmering"; "We can't even tell a joke in the workplace"; "We need to put our foot down"), and the debilitating effects of intra-corporate competition ("Bunch of vultures waiting for me to tire out... I get low numbers two months in a row, they're gonna feed on my insides"). This climaxes in the hotel bar, where Chad suggests his plan to Howard:

But say we were to find some gal - and I know we got a shitload of stuff to do, I know that - but I'm just saying. For the sake of argument, say we stumble on something, okay? And I mean, this person's just vulnerable as hell. You know, young thing, wallflower type, or whatever. Or, like, disfigured in some way or other [laughs]. But just some woman who's pretty sure that life, and I mean a full, healthy sexual life, romance, stuff like that is just lost to her forever, okay? [...] Anyhow, we take a girl of that type - just some corn-fed bitch who'd practically mess her pants if you sharpen a pencil for her, and we both hit her, you know, small talk, a dinner-date, flowers [...] And then one day, out goes the rug and us pulling it hard, and Jill - she just comes tumbling after. Trust me, she'll be reaching for the sleeping pills within a week. And we'll be laughing about this till we're very old men. What do you think?

Thus, within the opening minutes of the film, not only has its central premise has been expounded, but we know virtually everything we need to know about the central male protagonists: that Chad is aggressive, highly articulate, apparently jaded, and superficially charming; and that Howard is hurt, confused, easily-led and

passive. The conversation ends with a sexist joke from Chad (“I don’t trust anything that bleeds for a week and don’t die”), and a parting exchange -

Chad: So, you in?

Howard: Yeah, I’m in.

Chad: So, let’s do it. Let’s hurt somebody.

- which sets up our expectations of what is to follow (the phrase “Let’s hurt somebody” having been LaBute’s creative starting-point for the project).⁵⁵ Thus, the very next shot, following a caption announcing “Week 1” of the project (the film is explicitly divided into eight “acts”), shows Christine, their victim-to-be, typing at her desk.

Since the credibility of the story which LaBute is telling is largely dependent on our believing in the likelihood of the individuals with whom he presents us behaving in certain ways, it is not surprising that the plot tends to progress via scenes whose primary function is to illuminate character; in particular, the contrasting natures of Chad and Howard. Thus, Howard is shown, during office hours, constantly obsessing over work-related matters, and uneasily attempting to assert his authority over subordinates; while Chad is seldom seen to be doing anything constructive, other than bonding with his temporary workmates over which of their colleagues they detest the most - although he pointedly declines to overtly criticise Howard. In one of the film’s most disturbing scenes, one which appears to pay direct homage to Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross*, Chad intimidates a young African-American intern into dropping his trousers, in order to demonstrate that he has “the balls” for the job; in contrast, the only relaxed work-place conversations we see Howard indulging in are with Black colleagues.

⁵⁵ According to the interview on the film’s official website, www.sonypictures.com/classics/men/interview.html.)

Despite the fact that the audience is being prepared for a fairly straightforward depiction of Chad and Howard's relationships with Christine - the hard-nosed Chad will dump her, the kinder-hearted Howard will fall in love with her - LaBute does not shy away from complicating the issue with ambiguity. Christine, otherwise portrayed as demure and self-deprecating, goes on dates with both men, without telling either about the other. Shortly after starting to see Christine, Chad, who has no reason to be insincere at this point, admits to Howard that he is beginning to have feelings for her, whilst persisting in mocking her speaking voice ("...when she's talking, then you just want to slip down a side-street and hope no-one heard her swallowing her tongue as she tries to get a sentence out"). On their first date, Howard encourages Christine to speak, rather than use her note-pad, and later takes the trouble to learn a few phrases in sign-language; when he finally confronts her with the nature of his colleague's plan, however ("It's a game. To Chad it was a game and he found you. So perfect, he said, she's deaf, that was the thing, not love you. Not flowers and the feelings I have for you inside. No, it's meant to be a sport. Fun to watch you fall apart."), and realises that her feelings for Chad outweigh her affection for him, his desperation leads to a cruel outburst: "Look at you! You are fucking handicapped! You think you can choose?! Men falling at your feet?!"

Perhaps the scene which best combines the theatrical and the cinematic is the climactic one during which Chad is forced to come clean to Christine about his deception, in the hotel-room (Howard's) which he has been using for their assignations. During a single take, shot in medium close-up, Chad begins by tenderly assuring her that they will see one another again, even though his job is finishing, awkwardly responding when she declares her love for him, stammering in confusion when Christine tells him that she knows about his and Howard's "game", then

laughing, and abandoning all pretence - "I was gonna try and let you down easy, but I can't keep a straight face, so, fuck it. Surprise. So, how does it feel. I mean, right now. This instant, how do you feel inside, knowing what you know? Tell me." She slaps him, he derides her for the fact that she is only able to emit a squeak ("That's all? It only hurts that much? Well, I guess I can go then, huh? The deed's done."), picks up his jacket, and leaves her crying on the bed. Thus, within four real-time minutes, LaBute transmutes Chad and Christine from a couple about to make love into a broken-hearted woman and a brutally self-satisfied man who will never see one another again.

The film ends ("Weeks later", a caption tells us) with Chad in an enhanced position of power in both his professional and personal lives (although in an interview (Rosenfeld, 1999), LaBute suggests that ten years on his activities will have landed him in prison), and Christine making a fresh start. The real victim turns out to be the hapless Howard, who has lost his position in the workplace, his health, his dignity, and the chance of happiness. LaBute appears to be making points not only about the banality of evil, but also the evil of banality - the consequences of being an unthinking fellow-traveller of Sin, rather than an instigator.

I would argue, then, that through the expedient of taking interpersonal cruelty rather than the machinations of the politically powerful as his primary subject matter (and under pressure from both adherents and critics of his chosen religion to justify this in ethical terms), LaBute has created works in the "moral fable" tradition of Swift and Voltaire; works designed for a cynical, cine-literate audience. By utilising audacious plots and inhabiting them with characters who revel in "saying the unsayable" (Matthews, 1998, p37), he has efficaciously applied the ethic he derived

from his experience within a small-scale live performance arena, i.e. that theatre, and by extension, filmmaking, should be a “contact sport” (as discussed in Spencer, 2003) having a discernible, emotional, cautionary impact on audiences.

CHAPTER TEN:

DRAMATIST-FILMMAKERS - COMMONALITIES

Whilst the four dramatist-filmmakers on whose work I have focussed in this study might be said to come from a variety of traditions, and produced their work under different industrial circumstances - Preston Sturges in the Hollywood of the classical period, Rainer Werner Fassbinder in the television-subsidised West German arena of the 1970s, David Mamet and Neil LaBute within the contemporary American “independent” mainstream - a number of common threads can be discerned which may be helpful in delineating their distinctiveness as a group.

All of these filmmakers might, for example, be said to have developed highly effective practical strategies for retaining creative control of their projects. The most obvious of these is budgetary. By keeping costs low, Sturges was able to evade much of the intra-organisational scrutiny inherent to Hollywood’s studio system of the 1940s, and make bold satirical statements. Fassbinder’s ability to make a virtue of the financial constraints under which he worked enabled him to build up a substantial oeuvre within a short period of time. Mamet, before his reputation as a director was established, invested his substantial earnings as a screenwriter-for hire in his own early low-budget productions. LaBute, as we have seen, relied on friends to finance his first feature, and has continued to work in a cost-effective manner; his first “studio” film, *Nurse Betty* (2000) cost \$24 million to make (according to the Internet Movie Database), at a time when the average Hollywood budget was over \$50 million.

Another strategy common to these dramatist-filmmakers - and to most auteurist directors - is the assembling of close-knit teams of collaborators with whom an operational shorthand can be developed in order to facilitate the creative and administrative process. Thus Sturges worked frequently with producer Paul Jones, cinematographer Victor Milner, musical director Sigmund Krumgold, and editor Stuart Gilmore, as well as an informal repertory company of actors including William Demarest, Robert Warwick and Franklin Pangborn. Fassbinder (with cinematographer Michael Ballhaus, composer Peer Raben, actors including Hanna Schygulla, Margit Carstensen, Kurt Raab and Harry Baer), Mamet (with producer Michael Hausmann, editor Barbara Tulliver, composer Alaric Jans, actors including Joe Mantegna, William H. Macy, Rebecca Pidgeon and Ricky Jay) and LaBute (with producer Steven Pevner, editor Joel Plotch and actor Aaron Eckhart) have followed in this tradition, and this has enhanced their control over their work, thus contributing to its distinctiveness.

Another factor linking this group of directors is the central importance of performance to the effectiveness of their work. While only Fassbinder frequently cast himself in his plays and films, all of the others have had experience as performers (Mamet who trained as an actor under venerated teacher Sanford Meisner, and had a supporting role in a major Hollywood crime thriller (*Black Widow* (Bob Rafelson, 1987))); LaBute as a student, and an actor in a low budget feature directed by a fellow Mormon filmmaker (*High School Spirits* (Michael L. Schaertl, 1986)); and Sturges with brief appearances in his own *Sullivans' Travels* and *Christmas in July*, as well as a Bob Hope comedy late in his life - *Paris Holiday* (Gerd Oswald, 1957)). I would argue that this practical experience, in conjunction with a background which involved working closely with actors in a theatrical milieu, helped to engender a

solidarity with them which resulted in their making the kind of films where the onus is on the performer, rather than, for example, the editor or cinematographer, to create work whose impact is emotional and intellectual rather than purely visual. Sturges' sophisticated, rapid-fire comedic dialogue, for example, could only have been delivered by able performers; Fassbinder's films were most successful when his characters, through performance, were able to embody aspects of troubled nationhood in a humanistic rather than a schematic manner (e.g. Brigitte Mira in *Ali*, Hanna Schygulla in *The Marriage of Maria Braun*); Mamet's deliberately stilted approximations of failed and/or manipulative interpersonal communication are at their most acute when delivered by gifted individuals who are able to make them appear naturalistic (e.g. Ben Gazzara in *The Spanish Prisoner*, Gene Hackman in *Heist*); and the abusiveness of LaBute's banal evil-doers is especially piquant when the actors playing them (e.g. Aaron Eckhart in *In the Company of Men*, Rachel Weisz in *The Shape of Things*) allow us glimpses of the fear and frailty which underlie it.⁵⁶

The textual complexity which provides the context for such performances is another factor which distinguishes playwright-filmmakers from other auteurs, if only because theatrical texts customarily make greater intellectual demands on the audience than cinematic ones (as discussed earlier). As might be expected, dramatist-filmmakers tend to place more emphasis on language than is customary, in terms not only of the superior verbal fluency of the characters presented, but also in respect of an appreciation of the power of words to convey vast amounts of information in a manner which amuses (in the case of Sturges), to expose social differences (as in Fassbinder), to cause pain (as with Labute), and (in the work of Mamet) to hinder

⁵⁶ Another playwright-director-performer is Woody Allen, the actor-friendliness of whose work can perhaps be gauged by the fact that 5 performers to date have won Academy Awards for their work in his films; 10 further acting nominees include Allen himself (for *Annie Hall* (1977)).

rather than enable meaningful social interaction, and to obfuscate rather than elucidate the truth.

I would argue that the dramatist-filmmaker is in a better position than most directors to claim sole authorship of a film text. Evidence for this can be discerned in the coherence with which ideas are pursued in the work of the artists discussed here, whether it be the wide-ranging patrician satire of Sturges, Fassbinder's critique of the social mores prevalent in the divided Germany of the 1970s, Mamet's pessimistic take on deception and non-communication, or LaBute's profane sermonising about the consequences of cruelty.

This coherence, however, is not inconsistent with the ambiguity which is inherent to any text which aims to transcend the agitprop approach to issues of moment. Thus, Sturges both celebrated and mocked Hollywood, the family, the war effort and other sacred cows; Fassbinder was often critical of groups to which he himself was proud to belong (the Left, gays, artists); Mamet's view (as discussed elsewhere) is that the purpose of art is to point out the complexity of life rather than to provide easy answers to its problems, political or otherwise; and LaBute often appears to be revelling in the immorality of his characters even as he holds them up for our disapproving scrutiny.

The contextual factors which link those playwright-filmmakers who have found success, then, involve their scrupulousness in respect both of budgeting, and building effective collaborative teams; while, in textual terms, they have created a body of work which tends to foreground performance and language, to make intellectual demands in an entertaining manner, and to embrace ambiguity. These are all factors which, I would argue, have their genesis, at least in part, in their having

developed a consciousness of and respect for live theatre audiences, this giving their work an organic, humanistic edge.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
PRACTICAL PROJECTS
NO. 3 - “I’M NOT LIKE THIS”

The objective in the construction of a third practical project was to create a piece which illustrated points made above, whilst being dramatically effective in its own right. The resulting work is entitled “I’m Not Like This”.

The obvious starting-point was the “Live Cinema” Manifesto, outlined previously; although it was imperative that a story be devised where such an aesthetic would be appropriate. There was also the question of feasibility, given extremely limited resources; it was decided that a script should be developed which could, if necessary, be filmed on a no-budget basis. In the event, I was fortunate to have the assistance of a student producer with filmmaking experience, and some funding was available.

In developing a theoretical basis for a film practice based on the work of dramatist-filmmakers, I felt that the most productive approach would be to cherry-pick those elements which would prove most relevant and useful. Thus, from Preston Sturges, I took the idea of directing whilst writing the screenplay; i.e. composing a script in a form which would dictate a certain style in respect of directing and performance. The need to make demands on the performers of the kind which are generally perceived as more appropriate to stage than screen acting was also paramount. From Mamet came the idea of an uncomplicated directorial technique - deciding where the “story” was at any given point, and making sure that this was

where the camera was pointed;⁵⁷ I also opted for a heightened, theatrical naturalism in respect of dialogue, although eschewing Mametian stylisation. Inspired by Fassbinder and LaBute I chose to use long, unbroken takes where possible, in order to enhance the narrative integrity within these scenes, and create the illusion of the “truth” being told in real time;⁵⁸ these authors also inspired me to use depictions of the micro-politics of power in order to comment upon cruelty and isolation in a wider social context.

The issue of performative presence, as discussed earlier, was also significant when it came to composing the screenplay; it was essential that it should provide sufficient scope for actors to develop a style of performance which would enable them to breach the fourth wall, and create an impact on the audience which was rooted in performance and writing rather than cinematographic trickery. It was also important that a greater variety of story-telling techniques be utilised in this film than in my previous two: direct-to-camera address, the long, uncut dialogue scene, the monologue within a dramatic context; as well as more filmically conventional short dialogue scenes and sequences shot entirely without speech.

The treatment for the resulting screenplay reads as follows:

Tommy is an averagely unhappy young executive, struggling to keep his equilibrium after a number of disappointments in his personal life

Sky is a prostitute, keen to rise above her status as a faceless victim of circumstance.

⁵⁷ “Every time you make a choice as a director, it must be based on whether the thing in question is essential to telling the story.” Mamet, 1992, p51

⁵⁸ “...when the scene lasts a long time, when it’s drawn out, then the audience can really see what is happening between the characters involved. If I started cutting within a scene like that, then no-one would see what it was all about.” Fassbinder, quoted in Rayns, 1979, p83.

Our story begins when, one night, they have a brief, sordid encounter - Tommy is stumbling home alone after a drunken night out with friends; Sky is simply doing what she does.

A few weeks later, they meet by chance in a pub. Tommy is understandably embarrassed, but Sky, though unrepentant, quickly puts him at his ease, and within a very short space of time, they are on their way to becoming friends.

Subsequently, we gain some insight into the wearying mundanity of Sky's profession, and the extent to which her identity is routinely effaced as she becomes a blank canvas upon which her paying customers complacently paint their self-deluding fantasies.

Meanwhile, a stricken Tommy gives vent to his confusion over this new, tender but (now) chaste relationship, in the company of a cynical friend.

The climax of the story comes when a violent encounter with her pimp forces Sky to face the consequences of her defiance. She comes to Tommy - for help, for protection, for comfort. But what has he to offer her, other than impotent rage?

Eschewing conventional narrative closure, "I'm Not Like This" transcends romantic cliché, and asks searching questions about the nature of love and the possibility of change.

This treatment was produced, some time after the screenplay had been written, in order to help to secure funding for the production. This process helped to clarify the extent to which I has succeeded in following my authorial vision. I felt

that the piece dealt with issues previously addressed in my work - specifically fractious relationships, isolation, masculinity in crisis and social marginalisation.⁵⁹ Another intention was that characterisations be as non-stereotypical, complex and ambiguous as time and considerations of credibility would allow - thus the prostitute attempts to resist victimhood; and her potential saviour is not an innocent, being clearly shown, in the first instance, as a client of hers. It was also important that the piece address “issues” in a dramatic rather than a didactic or schematic manner; and that facile narrative resolution be resisted; I felt that, on the level of the screenplay, at least, this was achieved.

The film was shot over a period of four days, with a crew of four (camera, sound, make-up, hair), and a cast of four plus three extras (one of whom did not make the final cut). The producer/cameraman felt it incumbent on him to allow me creative control of the project; although his experience in terms of constructing visuals was invaluable, and he did suggest the inclusion of a non-dialogue sequence which was not in the original screenplay, in order to aid narrative flow. I also deferred to the make-up team in respect of the extent to which the character Sky was shown to have been subjected to violence at the film’s climax, since excessive bandaging would have unnecessarily impeded the actress’ speech. The most pressing technical difficulty was the absence of a focus-puller, which led to blurring of the image in scenes where the camera was called upon to zoom in and out on characters.

We were fortunate to acquire the services of actors with significant experience of stage work, which prepared them both for a relatively lengthy period of rehearsal (several sessions over a three-week period), and for the necessity to

⁵⁹ See Smith, 2001, a play which depicted a friendship between two Black AIDS victims from different social backgrounds over a period of ten years.

commit large segments of dialogue to memory. By chance, they exhibited a variety of accents (Welsh Valleys, Scottish, RP, Merseyside), which contributed to a sense of geographical alienation, enhancing the impression that none of the characters was truly “home”.

While it is abundantly clear from its technical limitations that the finished piece was shot on a very limited budget, I feel that this is to some extent, over-ridden by the emphasis on writing and performance, which helped it to successfully achieve my dramatic and theoretical aims. Whilst utilising the generic template of the “love story”, with its consequent fetishisation of the female body, the piece attempts to undermine conventional illusionism by having its female protagonist return the gaze of the viewer at a crucial point. The adoption of an unadorned visual style enables focus to be placed squarely on the text and performances, and allows the bleakness of the characters’ personal circumstances to be reflected.

I would resist the suggestion that a tendency towards bleakness of this kind might be inherent in the “Live Cinema Manifesto”. As with *Dogme*, its primary aim is to privilege the dramatic over the simplistically generic; and in the hands of an able writer, drama can readily incorporate comedic elements. Furthermore, “Live Cinema” need not necessarily be incompatible with genre film *per se*. While such an austere approach to filmmaking might not be conducive to the production of features whose hallmark is spectacle - action-adventures, or historical epics, for example - its roots in theatricality would suggest that stories within genres which have long found favour within the commercial theatre - such as the murder mystery, the ghost story, or organic horror of the *Grand Guignol* variety - might readily suit cinematic treatment of this kind. As David Mamet in particular has

demonstrated, it is quite possible to produce work which exhibits emotional honesty, political acuity and intellectual integrity whilst playing with genre conventions.

CONCLUSION:

IS EVERY PLAYWRIGHT A POTENTIAL FILMMAKER?

The purpose of this research project was two-fold: to ascertain the impact which those text-oriented playwrights who have chosen to direct for the cinema have had on film form over the years; and to attempt to demonstrate, through practical investigation, the extent to which it might be feasible for neophyte filmmakers with a background in writing for theatre to constructively bring their specific skills and experience to bear in this field. The central hypothesis is that having worked in an arena where authorship is a relatively uncontentious issue (although devised stage works might legitimately boast a multiplicity of authors; and a theatre director might claim ownership of an extant play through a radical interpretation of it), the playwright who moves into film is as able as any novelist, poet, or painter to claim that a piece advances his/her individual vision, should he/she choose to work in this way.

If we can define an author, in purely practical terms, as “the person without whom a work would not exist”, it seems clear that the dramatist-filmmaker (in common with other “hyphenate” figures such as the writer-producer-director, e.g. Billy Wilder, Francis Ford Coppola, Oliver Stone) challenges Hollywood’s Institutional Mode through his very existence as an authorial figure with significant operational control over his projects. While it would be as foolhardy to attempt to characterise “films written and directed by playwrights” in strictly generic terms, it could be argued that as diverse as the comedies of Preston Sturges, the crime thrillers of David Mamet, and the dystopian relationship dramas of Neil LaBute are, they all

belong to the broad genre of the “progressive” film (as discussed by Klinger, 1984); its hallmarks including a pessimistic worldview, a questioning attitude towards the values propounded by “dominant” cinema, structural complexity, the tendency to “refuse” closure, and stylistic self-consciousness. This appears to be broadly synonymous with Bordwell’s concept of an “art cinema” (Bordwell, 1979) in which psychological realism (conveyed via ambiguity) and authorial expressivity are evident. However the works of dramatist-filmmakers are conceptualised, it seems clear that their existence (at least in the context of Hollywood, European filmmakers such as Fassbinder being generally perceived as less subject to corporate constraints) works to counter the previously-noted tendency of both the film industry and high theory to efface the Author from the creative process.

The fact that the work of those film director/dramatists whom I have studied shares certain features does not, of course, constitute evidence that playwright-filmmakers *per se* have influenced the development of film in the same way that, say, dramatists who were recruited as screenwriters did in the early days of sound cinema. Their impact has been on an individual basis, with Sturges, for example, virtually originating the concept of the writer-director, and intellectualising the Hollywood “screwball” comedy of the 1930s and 1940s; Fassbinder a hugely significant figure within the New German Cinema of the 1970s; Mamet credited with having developed an especially convoluted form of story-telling within the crime genre; and LaBute bringing a uniquely cynical sensibility to the relationship drama. Nevertheless I would argue that the centrality of performative presence, and the importance of language in their work tends to suggest that even playwrights of more modest accomplishment might draw lessons from their approach to cinema.

My approach to the practical element of this thesis involved three diverse, purpose-written pieces of work, designed to illustrate the strengths of an approach to filmmaking which foregrounded these elements.

The objective with the first film, “The Beauty”, was to present a dramatic monologue of a kind which would be difficult to efficaciously replicate on stage given its context-specificity - a public toilet in the aftermath of an assault. It was important not only that the piece contained its own narrative, but that it was also evocative of a life for the central character before and after the viewer eavesdropped on his personal crisis. Making the camera inherent to the story was also helpful strategy in terms of shaping the script. Had the piece been longer and more discursive in tone, I may have been tempted to subject it to post-production processing - overlaying or interspersing the scene with illustrative imagery, for example, or distorting the sound in order to enhance the impression of diegetic disorientation. In the event, however, I felt it important to display faith in the integrity of the writing and performance; my argument being that the story being told ought to be sufficiently arresting in and of itself, and that if technical trickery is required to maintain the interest of an audience, then this is due to flaws which should have been addressed whilst writing the screenplay.

This principle, one which underlies this entire project, was a major consideration when it came to conceiving my second piece, “My Enemy’s Enemy”. I set myself the challenge of writing a short two-handed play which could be shot as a film in one take, and yet contained sufficient narrative thrust to maintain attention. Methods of achieving this included allowing the precise nature of the setting (a prison cell in a country run by a brutal dictator) and the relationship between the two characters (a political prisoner and his female guard) to become apparent over time,

rather than explaining it immediately; keeping exposition to a minimum so that all information springs naturally and plausibly from conversation; making sure that this conversation has a direction by giving each character clear objectives (the Prisoner to subtly charm the Guard in such a way that she does not kill him, a sanction which is well within her remit; the Guard to tease the Prisoner before reluctantly releasing him into a war-torn outside world); and having a clear resolution in mind at all times. It was also important, in terms of sustaining the interest of the spectator, that the political and sexual tension between the characters be evident. The intentionally reductive directorial ethic (“point the camera at the story”) necessitated the kind of textual analysis (“where *is* the story at any given moment?”) which was useful when it came to removing irrelevancies from the script and clarifying the intentions of the piece. In order to ascertain whether there was sufficient narrative momentum within “My Enemy’s Enemy”, I created a “silent” version of the film, where the dialogue was muted, and replaced solely by a suitably evocative piece of music - the *String Quartet No.1* by Leos Janacek (“The Kreutzer Sonata”). To my mind, this was a successful experiment, in that both the nature of the power relationship and the fact that some significant change was occurring were plainly discernible, although, inevitably, subtleties and references were lost.

In respect of my third film, “I’m Not Like This”, the aim was to make a piece which was (as far as resources allowed) more conventionally filmic than “The Beauty” and “My Enemy’s Enemy” in terms of structure, but which conformed to the tenets set out in the “‘Live Cinema’ Manifesto”, which had resulted from my theoretical and practical research up to that point. There follows a brief analysis of the extent to which I felt that I was successful in applying it:

The piece should be rehearsed and blocked as would a stage-play.

This was scrupulously adhered to, over a period of 2-3 weeks.

Each scene should be shot in one take (or appear to be so).

I deemed this tenet to be important only in respect of those scenes which contained dialogue; I allowed the cameraman and editor more latitude when it came to non-dialogue scenes.

Each scene should contain narrative progression, such that a non-speaker of the language should be able to discern that the lives of the protagonists are changing.

This was designed to avoid both lengthy, discursive dialogue scenes which did not advance the story, as well as narrative-irrelevant non-dialogue sequences (e.g. establishing shots, non-diegetic inserts). I felt that I achieved this, since, for example, the longest dialogue scene consisted of a conversation during which the pivotal relationship developed from one of suspicion and borderline hostility to one of closeness and empathy; of the others, one elucidated the female character's predicament, another did the same in respect of internal conflicts within the central male character, and the other constituted the climax of the tale.

The dramatic context of the piece, naturalistic or otherwise, should be convincingly rendered via decor and performance.

This was achieved by shooting entirely on location, and working with actors in such a way as to ensure naturalistic performances.

To the extent that they do not utterly undermine the intentions of the script, minor errors by the actors should remain in the finished piece.

This was designed to enhance naturalistic performance; thus minor stumbles and deviations from the script were allowed where this did not impede the flow of the narrative.

The role of the director is to ensure that, at all times, the eye of the audience is focussed on the story.

The role of the editor is to enhance sound, image and mood, and to preserve the integrity of text and performance.

These were achieved by employing a narrative-centred cinematographic aesthetic; very little material which was irrelevant to the basic story was filmed; landscape shots were removed from an early edit; the editor was instructed not to add effects, and to keep transitions between scenes as unintrusive as possible.

The writer's vision is paramount.

I believe that this was accomplished, in that the completed film bore a close resemblance to that which might have been imagined from reading my original screenplay.

The centrality of this “manifesto” to my thesis should not be overstated. My objective has been to examine the work of playwright-filmmakers as a group, rather than to formulate a set of prescriptive principles, as *Dogme 95*, or Aristotle’s three

classical unities⁶⁰ came to be perceived. Its development has, however, been a useful exercise in applying a grounded theory technique within the field of the creative arts (rather than the social sciences where it is more prevalent). Furthermore, it proved to be a useful starting-point for practical research into the process of making a dramatic film. I suggest that its chief value would be as a means of helping to opening up a space within the field of theoretical film practice which has, to a large extent, remained unexplored, i.e. the perspective of the creative writer in theatre who wishes to explore the possibilities of the moving image.

The “liveness” of the ethic espoused within the manifesto drew comparison, when it was presented at a University of Glamorgan Seminar,⁶¹ to the aesthetic exhibited in the live dramas regularly broadcast during the 1950s’ “golden age” of American television, and generally given a high-cultural branding (e.g. “Goodyear Television Playhouse”, “General Electric Theater”). This is significant, since several of them later became canonical Hollywood films (e.g. *Marty* (Delbert Mann, 1955 - written by Paddy Chayefsky), *12 Angry Men* (Sidney Lumet, 1957 - written by Reginald Rose), *Judgment at Nuremberg* (Stanley Kramer, 1961 - written by Abby Mann), *Requiem for a Heavyweight* (Ralph Nelson, 1962 - written by Rod Serling), *Days of Wine and Roses* (Blake Edwards, 1962 - written by J.P. Miller)) of the kind which defy easy generic classification, and whose effects are largely achieved through a combination of self-consciously “theatrical” performance styles, intelligent writing, and weighty subject-matter. In recent years a number of television series

⁶⁰ “The unity of action: a play should have one main action that it follows, with no or few subplots; the unity of place: a play should cover a single physical space and should not attempt to compress geography, nor should the stage represent more than one place; the unity of time: a play should represent an action that takes approximately the same amount of time as the play; years should not pass during the hours a play takes.” Outlined online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Unities.

⁶¹ Arts and Media Postgraduate Seminar, 23rd November, 2005.

both in the U.K. (e.g. *Coronation Street*, *The Bill*, *The Quatermass Experiment*⁶²) and in the U.S.A. (*ER*, *Will and Grace*, *The West Wing*) have experimented once more with live broadcasting, although the results have been both variable in quality and dependent on genre, with situation comedies regressing to their origins as theatrical farces, and more serious dramas taking on the tinge of documentary realism, with the use of hand-held cameras almost mandatory.⁶³ I would argue that the immediacy inherent in cinematic “liveness”, in terms of performance in particular, is worthy of further study.

While the Danish originators of *Dogme* have denied that their motives included the facilitation of the production of low-budget films,⁶⁴ it is certainly the case that, once it had become established as a movement, cost-conscious producers elsewhere in the world sought to exploit the new “lo-fi” mood it had engendered; there was, for example, talk at one point of the B.B.C. setting up a “*Dogme* unit”, employing filmmakers such as Antonia Bird and John Maybury,⁶⁵ and the New York based company InDigEnt (Independent Digital Entertainment) has released a number of *Dogme*-influenced,⁶⁶ digitally shot features since 1999 (including *Personal Velocity* (Rebecca Miller, 2002), *Tadpole* (Gary Winick, 2002), *Pieces of April* (Peter Hedges, 2003), *Land of Plenty* (Wim Wenders, 2004), *Lonesome Jim* (Steve Buscemi, 2005)), largely family/relationship oriented dramas, after the fashion of *Festen* (Thomas Vinterberg, 1998), and often theatrical in origin and/or tone (e.g.

⁶² A feature-length live BBC broadcast (dir. Sam Miller, 2005), adapted from a 6-part serial first shown in 1953.

⁶³ See e.g. Meakins (1998) on the live *E.R.* episode, which she likens to *cinema-verité*.

⁶⁴ “The *Dogme* 95 Manifesto does not concern itself with the economic aspects of filmmaking. A ‘*Dogme*’ film could be low-budget or it could have a 100 million dollar budget as long as the filmmaker follows the Vow of Chastity”. Thomas Vinterberg interviewed on the official *Dogme* 95 website (<http://www.Dogme95.dk/faq/faq/htm>).

⁶⁵ “Beeb Plans British *Dogme*”, *The Guardian*, October 8, 1999 (available online – <http://film.guardian.co.uk>).

⁶⁶ “Creative inspiration for the company comes from significant sources such as Danish filmmaking collective *Dogme* 95 and vanguard filmmaker John Cassavetes.” From the company’s official website, www.indigent.net

Tape (Richard Linklater, 2001 - orig. play by Stephen Belber), *Chelsea Walls* (Ethan Hawke, 2001 - orig. play by Nicole Burdette)). The perception has arisen amongst some observers that this aesthetic has led to a new kind of formulaic filmmaking; one critic suggesting that:

The result, all around the world at present, is depressingly predictable: low-budget films, many of them shot and edited with digital technology, that are essentially talk-fests. Actors wildly improvise for hours, while a hand-held camera zips around them like a dog let off its leash - and the footage is unfussily jump-cut in the editing room, with little consideration for the work's overall shape or form. (Martin, 2005, not paginated)

If one accepts this as true, it is perhaps unsurprising, given the tendency of the industry worldwide to produce multiple replicas of successful films with a short space of time;⁶⁷ not to mention the rapidity, as within most areas of human endeavour, with which revolutions can become orthodoxies. Nevertheless, I would argue that the experienced and committed dramatist should be well able to ensure that the verbal content of such “talk-fests” is compelling in itself.

It is also my contention that playwrights are somewhat less submissive to formal orthodoxy than other professionals who might choose to work in film, since they are, to a large extent, self-taught (despite the fairly recent trend in which courses in play-writing are offered by universities - I would suggest that the vast majority of people enrolling on such courses already consider themselves to be playwrights). This is less likely to be the case in with regard to students of screen-writing, film editing, camera work, directing, et al, where conventional wisdoms (e.g. the three-act

⁶⁷ See, for example, the multiplicity of British gangster films which followed in the wake of the success of *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (Guy Ritchie, 1998), as discussed by Leigh (2000 – a year in which 14 such films were reviewed by *Sight & Sound*.)

structure, invisible narration) are taught as hard and fast rules. As we have seen, playwrights tend to develop their skills within a milieu in which they have the freedom to utilise whatever structures and organic effects are required in order to mould their personal beliefs, interests and preoccupations into stories whose success or failure to engage with an audience can be immediately assessed. They thus become expert at developing a visual aesthetic which suits the needs of the particular story they wish to relate, considerations of style or orthodoxy being secondary.

On the whole, dramatists have been less successful when adapting their own stage works for the screen than more objective hands (a case in point being David Mamet, whose *Glengarry Glen Ross* (James Foley, 1992) appears to be becoming a canonical screen work (it was No. 195 in a popular film magazine's poll of the "201 Greatest Movies Of All Time" (*Empire*, March 2006, 77-101)), while his own film adaptation of *Oleanna* (Mamet, 1994) has received somewhat less attention than its theatrical productions). When creating original works for film, however, they have, as we have seen, addressed a variety of subject-matter. When they have made traditional genre films, they have infused them with narrative complexity and textual sophistication. Those who have pursued more idiosyncratic agendas have also made their mark - Neil LaBute, for example, having been accused of helping to create a new sub-genre in American independent film: the cinema of misanthropy (along with Todd Solondz - see Orr, 2004); not to mention the highly individualistic *oeuvres* of playwright-filmmakers not dealt with in this study, such as Woody Allen (varied aspects of whose work have been much discussed - see e.g. Blake, 1991; Quart 1992), David Hare, Stephen Poliakoff and Sam Shepard. It is also worth noting that *Six Shooter* (2005), winner of the 2006 Academy Award for Best Live Action Short Film, was the directorial debut of London-Irish dramatist Martin McDonagh (author

of e.g. *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (Royal Court Theatre, 1996), and *The Pillowman* (Royal National Theatre, 2003), which won the Olivier Award for Best New Play in 2004).

Famously commenting on his early experiences in Hollywood, Mamet addressed the truism concerning the collaborative nature of filmmaking thus: “From a screenwriter’s point-of-view, the correct rendering should be: ‘Film is a collaborative business: bend over’” (Mamet, 1987, xv). Like script-writers throughout the history of the film industry, he has been scathing about the prodigious capacity of artistically and commercially unproductive producers and script-development executives to impede their work (see e.g. Mamet, 2004a; Mamet, 2004b). It could be argued that Mamet’s cinematic output constitutes his contribution to the argument for the development of a writer-oriented aesthetic in cinema, and that the work of dramatist-filmmakers as a whole provides evidence that an industrial context in which the writer’s vision is prioritised can result in the production of films which are both entertaining and intellectually challenging.

To advance the concept of a writer-oriented cinematic aesthetic is not, of course, to suggest that the process of narrative film-making is anything other than collaborative; Mamet himself has been fulsome in his praise for the professionalism of actors and crews (see e.g. Mamet, 2003a; Mamet, 2003b), and none of the films studied as part of this project could have been brought into being without the co-operative efforts of small teams of skilled and highly-motivated individuals. As happens routinely in theatre, however, these teams have been assembled in order to fulfil the perceived needs of the writer and, more importantly, the story he or she wishes to tell. The onus is thus on the writer to provide an effective script in the first

instance, and the actors to deliver accomplished performances, such that the function of post-production processing is to enhance the narrative, rather than to conceal deficiencies which should have been eliminated during the pre-production and production phases.

The film directors who have formed the basis for this study have produced work which has exhibited a high degree of visual, verbal, political and emotional literacy. This is attributable, at least in part, to their experience as dramatists. While playwrights are frequently employed as screenwriters, it is clear that as directors in film they are an under-utilised resource. If the aim of the film industry is to create works whose artistic value outweighs their short-term commercial impact, a strategy which involved encouraging the development of a new breed of dramatist-filmmakers would, I suggest, be a wise one.

APPENDIX: THE SCREENPLAYS

THE BEAUTY

A screenplay by Othniel Smith

We are looking at the door of a men's public toilet, from the outside.

We hear the sound of scuffling coming from inside. Suddenly, the door bursts open, and a flustered-looking young man rushes out. He looks at us in alarm, then pushes us out of the way as he makes his hasty escape. We hurry through the door, into the toilet. Immediately, we see a man, in late middle age, slumped on the floor, leaning against the wall. His hair is ruffled, his nose is bleeding. He looks up at us, a little embarrassed.

OLDER MAN:

No, no, I... it's not what it looks like. I... I fell. I slipped, and fell. I... I was simply asking the time. I asked him what time it was, and he... he must have misread my intentions. It... it happens more often than you might suppose.

He smiles, sadly.

I... I'll be alright. Tough as old boots, me. Tougher than I look. It takes a lot to beat me down. The things I've been through. The things I've seen.

We hand him a paper handkerchief, which he accepts, dabbing at his nose as he speaks.

Oh. Thank-you. People... people never cease to amaze. The presumptions they make. The judgements. People can be so judgemental. So cruel, so... merciless. And yet...

He sighs.

And yet, it seems to me, when I look around, as I go about my business from day to day... it seems to me that there have never been so many beautiful people. It's marvellous. Truly. So much variety, so much daring. So much beauty. And... well, it's a stereotype, isn't it? Truth is beauty. Beautiful is good. It makes me so sad, sometimes. It does. The sheer beauty of it all makes me want to cry. Or... or perhaps I'm crying because...

He clears his throat, and shakes his head.

But no. Mustn't give in to self-pity. The most destructive emotion of all. No. One must laugh in the face of that foul impostor.

He looks deep into our eyes.

A word of advice, my friend. Never grow old. Never, ever grow old.

He slumps back against the wall, and closes his eyes.

I... I think I'll rest for a while.

He sighs. We start to back slowly away. Fade to black.

MY ENEMY'S ENEMY

by Othniel Smith

DARK. CLOSE-UP ON A MAN'S HANDS, CHAINED TO A WALL.

WE PAN OUT TO SEE...

THE PRISONER -IN HIS FORTIES, DRESSED IN RAGGED PRISON FATIGUES.

LIGHT COMES UP.

WE SEE THAT WE ARE IN A SMALL PRISON CELL. SPARSE - THERE IS A CHAIR, AND A BUCKET. THE MAN SLOWLY WAKES UP.

WE SLOWLY PAN ACROSS TO SEE...

The guard, standing in the doorway. She is in her thirties, dressed in a uniform. Not the fragile type. She stands for a while, looking at the prisoner, curious.

WE PAN BACK TO THE PRISONER.

The prisoner regains full consciousness. He looks at the guard.

SLOWLY ZOOM IN TO MEDIUM CLOSE-UP ON HIM.

PRISONER:

Is it that time already?

GUARD:

What time?

PRISONER:

Food. Is it time to eat?

GUARD:

No food.

PRISONER:

Oh. What time is it?

GUARD:

What's it to you?

PRISONER:

What?

GUARD:

Why do you need to know what time it is? Urgent appointment?

PRISONER:

Just interested. Just... trying to keep the mind active.

PAN TO GUARD.

GUARD:

Isn't that how you got here in the first place?

She chuckles, and keeps on staring.

PAN BACK TO PRISONER.

Several beats - he finally loses patience.

PRISONER:

What are you looking at?

PAN BACK TO GUARD.

GUARD:

(sinister)

I've never seen a dead man before. *(pause. She frowns.)*
Too much?

PRISONER:

I'm frozen to my very core.

GUARD:

Really?

THE CAMERA FOLLOWS HER AS...

She slowly starts to approach him, until they are face to face, very close.

PRISONER:

You've been practising. Not in a mirror, I hope.

GUARD:

That's not very nice.

PRISONER:

I'm not a very nice person. Growing less nice by the day.

GUARD:

And I always thought you were a gentleman.

PRISONER:

I was never a gentleman. I just managed to fool a few people.

GUARD:

Oh, yeah? Women? Bit of a shagger, in your time, were you?

PRISONER:

I'm not going to answer that.

GUARD:

Ah. Clever. Maintain an air of mystery. Still - we all know what you lot are like.

PRISONER:

My lot?

GUARD:

Academics.

PRISONER:

I'm not an academic.

GUARD:

You're more academic than me.

The prisoner opens his mouth to speak, then closes it again. The guard chuckles.

GUARD:

I know, I know. Not exactly difficult.

WE ZOOM IN TO A CLOSE-UP OF THE TWO OF THEM.

PRISONER:

It's not true, is it?

GUARD:

What's not true?

PRISONER:

Your never having seen a dead man.

GUARD:

Never let the facts get in the way, et cetera.

She moves away.

SLOW ZOOM OUT TO MEDIUM, CENTRING ON THE GUARD.

She goes and sits in the chair. She stretches her legs.

PRISONER:

What are you doing?

GUARD:

What does it look like?

PRISONER:

Making yourself at home?

GUARD:

Hardly.

PRISONER:

To what do I owe this inestimable honour?

GUARD:

What's the matter? Am I invading your personal space?

PRISONER:

Nothing better to do?

GUARD:

Just passing the time of day. It's a free country. (*she claps a hand to her mouth*) Oops - what am I saying? (*long pause*) Tell me a poem.

PAN TO THE PRISONER - MEDIUM SHOT.

PRISONER:

... A poem?

GUARD:

Yeah. You are a poet. Aren't you?

PRISONER:

You must be confusing me with someone else.

GUARD:

You're not the poet?

PRISONER:

No, I'm not the poet.

GUARD:

And you're not the academic.

PRISONER:

No.

GUARD:

So who are you?

PRISONER:

A question I ask myself every waking second.

PAN TO THE GUARD.

GUARD:

Now, that's not true. I've been doing this job long enough to know that. You aren't asking yourself "who?" You're asking yourself "why?" And occasionally, "when?"

PRISONER:

Very perceptive of you.

GUARD:

I'm not just a pretty face. Tell me a poem.

PRISONER:

I'm not a poet.

GUARD:

No, but you must know a poem. You're an educated man. You must have memorised poems. For the purposes of obtaining a shag.

PAN TO THE PRISONER. SLOW ZOOM IN.

PRISONER:

"Your eyes blue as stone. Your breasts soft as milk. Your skin warm as loneliness."

Silence.

PAN TO THE GUARD.

GUARD:

That was shit.

PRISONER:

I am not a poet. (pause) I need the bucket.

GUARD:

Well, I've sat down, now. You'll just have to do it in your pants.

PAN TO THE PRISONER.

PRISONER:

Actually, there's something strangely liberating about doing it in your pants.

PAN TO THE GUARD.

GUARD:

I'll take your word for it. Still. Come the glorious day, eh?

PRISONER:

What?

GUARD:

The glorious day. When we change places. The revolution! "El Presidente is dead, long live the new order!"

PRISONER:

We're not going to change places.

GUARD:

What? I thought you were a revolutionary.

PAN TO THE PRISONER.

PRISONER:

We're not going to change places, because I'm not like you.

GUARD:

Of course not. You're better than me.

PRISONER:

I just... it's just that I don't... don't believe in treating people the way I'm being treated. Even you.

GUARD:

What about El Presidente?

PRISONER:

I'd... I'd at least give him occasional access to the bucket.

PAN TO THE GUARD.

The guard smiles to herself. She reaches into her pocket, and takes out a small, mostly eaten bar of chocolate. She starts to eat it, with every appearance of sensual relish.

SLOW ZOOM IN ON HER, TO CLOSE-UP.

She continues to eat the chocolate.

SLOW PAN TO THE PRISONER - CLOSE-UP

The prisoner watches her, mouth watering.

PRISONER:

Nice?

GUARD:

Lovely, thanks.

PRISONER:

Creamy?

GUARD:

Nah. It's melted, and been refrigerated, melted and been refrigerated - all the creaminess has been bugged out of it, by the laws of physics.

PRISONER:

But it's still...

GUARD:

Gorgeous.

PRISONER:

Oh. Good. (pause) Strange. I could always take or leave chocolate. Before.

PAN TO THE GUARD. SLOW ZOOM OUT TO A MEDIUM SHOT.

GUARD:

I've always loved it. Could never afford it. Before. I suppose you'd say I've been corrupted by power.

PRISONER:

Power? This isn't power. This is an illusion.

GUARD:

Really?

THE CAMERA FOLLOWS HER AS...

She gets up, and starts to strut around in front of him, brandishing the bar of chocolate, taking a bite, licking her lips, licking her fingers, waving the chocolate in front of his face, etc. Teasing. He follows the chocolate with his eyes. She swallows the last chunk.

GUARD:

Mmm. Mm-mm-mm. Heavenly.

PRISONER:

A heavenly illusion.

GUARD:

Yeah?

She whips back her fist, and punches the prisoner very hard in the stomach.

GUARD:

What about that? Is that an illusion, too?

She watches as the prisoner, in his weakened state, takes some time to recover.

ZOOM OUT TO A LONG SHOT.

Eventually, he regains enough strength to speak.

PRISONER:

Thank-you. I was losing touch with my humanity.

GUARD:

You're full of shit.

PRISONER:

Well, thanks to you, not for very much longer. (*pause, as he regains more strength*) What was that for?

GUARD:

I don't appreciate being patronised.

PRISONER:

You love it, really. It gives you an excuse to... act the way you do.

GUARD:

Here... I've got something to show you!

She reaches into her back pocket, and takes out a crumpled sheet of newspaper. She waves it in his face.

GUARD:

They're marching!

PRISONER:

What?

GUARD:

The enemy! They're marching!

PRISONER:

Hah! Yes! Good! Good! Serve you bastards right!

The guard starts to laugh.

PRISONER:

See how you like it on the front line! See how you like it when the boot's on the other foot! We'll see what you're really made of, then! Away from this cushy, fucking... what... what are you laughing at? How... how many? Where are they? Which direction are they coming from? How far from the border are they?

GUARD:

Oh, they're a good distance from the border. Here.

ZOOM IN, TO CLOSE-UP, ON THE PRISONER AS...

She holds up the newspaper in front of the prisoner's eyes. He reads. He needs time to take it in. He sighs.

PRISONER:

Oh.

SLOW ZOOM OUT TO TWO-SHOT.

GUARD:

... "Oh"? "Oh"? Is that all you can muster up? Millions of your beloved socialists are marching in their own capital, in support of El Presidente, and all you can say is "oh"?

PRISONER:

They're not marching in support of El Presidente. They... it's... complicated.

GUARD:

It's not complicated at all! They don't have the balls!

PRISONER:

It's not about that.

GUARD:

I've seen them. On the television. Arriving at the airport, with their delegations, and their camera crews. Who do they come to visit? Not you! Not the prisoners, the poets, the academics, the dissidents! Oh, no! Your beloved socialists head straight for El Presidente's palace!

PRISONER:

You fail to grasp the subtleties of revolutionary thought.

GUARD:

Oh, excuse me - I don't see them instructing him in the ways of Marxism! I don't see them bundling him, blindfolded and trussed like a turkey, into the back of a jeep, and making the call to Commie Central. I see them crawling up his immaculate arse. "We honour you, El Presidente, we kiss you, El Presidente, we're not worthy, El Presidente." Now, I'm no expert, but this isn't the kind of behaviour I've been led to expect from revolutionaries.

PRISONER:

You don't understand. In that part of the world, the struggle has entered a new phase. They're... retrenching. They're adjusting their worldview. They're confronting their guilt.

GUARD:

They're scared shitless.

PRISONER:

Surely that's the correct response to the prospect of war.

GUARD:

They've got no balls.

PRISONER:

And the only way to denote one's possession of external genitalia is to cause the deaths of thousands of innocent people?

GUARD:

Well, it seems to do the trick for El Presidente.

ZOOM OUT TO LONG SHOT.

She folds the newspaper up, and stuffs it back into her pocket. She goes to sit in the chair. She seems depressed. Despite himself, the Prisoner reaches the point where he can no longer ignore this.

PRISONER:

Time of the month?

GUARD:

What?

PRISONER:

You seem a little... down.

SLOW ZOOM IN ON GUARD, TO MEDIUM CLOSE-UP.

GUARD:

I'm not like this. Do you think I enjoy being like this?

PRISONER:

I refuse to answer that question, on the grounds that you might hit me again.

GUARD:

If it wasn't for people like you, there wouldn't have to be people like me.

PRISONER:

All I did... all I did was write the truth about El Presidente.

GUARD:

Well, what did you have to go and do something stupid like that for?

PRISONER:

Careful - you're dangerously close to incriminating yourself.

GUARD:

We all know that El Presidente isn't a good man. That's what makes him a great man.

PRISONER:

I know. He protects us from the forces of chaos.

GUARD:

Exactly. And scum like you... scum like you put ideas in people's heads.

PRISONER:

Ah. People like... your cousin.

Startled, she looks up at him.

GUARD:

What the fuck do you know about my cousin?

PAN TO PRISONER.

PRISONER:

I don't know anything about your cousin. It's just... there's always a cousin. Or a long-lost lover. Or a friend of a friend. In your case, I figured that the cousin was the most likely option. What happened to him?

GUARD:

Pretty much what's happening to you.

PRISONER:

Oh.

PAN TO GUARD.

GUARD:

Although they tell me that with his last breath, he was expressing his undying devotion to El Presidente.

PRISONER:

That must be very comforting for you.

SLOW ZOOM OUT TO MEDIUM TWO-SHOT.

The guard smiles, gets up and goes over to him.

GUARD:

I never liked my cousin. When I was small, he used to sit on my head, and fart in my face. So, when he eventually turned out to be a socialist, I wasn't surprised.

PRISONER:

I wouldn't have thought there was necessarily a connection. Although, off the top of my head, I'm unable

to recall the specifics of the Marxian perspective on flatulence, so don't quote me.

GUARD:

You know the trouble with people like you?

PRISONER:

Of course. The trouble with people like me, is that we acknowledge the fact that we are troubled.

GUARD:

The trouble with people like you... the thing is... I don't know why El Presidente bothers. I mean... if there's anything your foreign friends have taught us... I mean, we all know what you lot are like. If you're not knifing one another in the back, you're shagging one another's women up the arse. All the time and energy he's wasted trying to destroy your sort. When you're perfectly happy to destroy one another.

She takes a key from her pocket, and unlocks the prisoner's chains.

PRISONER:

Wh... what... what are you doing?

GUARD:

I'll give you three guesses.

PRISONER:

I... I don't understand.

GUARD:

I don't think you're supposed to.

ZOOM OUT, TO LONG SHOT.

The prisoner is free. The guard stands back and watches, as he rubs his wrists.

PRISONER:

Well, I won't pretend to know what you're doing, but... thank-you.

GUARD:

Don't thank me. Thank El Presidente.

PRISONER:

... What?

GUARD:

He's freeing all the prisoners. In his infinite mercy.

PRISONER:

He... he's what? I don't understand.

GUARD:

Maybe he's finally realised he has nothing to fear from you. Maybe he's realised you're the least of his problems.

PRISONERS:

He's freeing... *all* the prisoners? All of us? Thieves, murderers, rapists?

GUARD:

In his infinite wisdom.

PRISONER:

But... but... I... I don't get it. I mean, the only time he's ever done this before... the only time he... oh!

GUARD:

And the penny finally drops.

PRISONER:

But... the newspaper.

MEDIUM ZOOM IN ON GUARD.

GUARD:

That's your precious democracy for you. You're free to say what you like, but they're free to say you're wrong. And they don't even get the privilege of killing you. It'll never catch on.

She leaves.

*THE CAMERA DOES NOT MOVE AS SHE LEAVES THE FRAME.
SLOW PAN TO THE PRISONER.
WE FOLLOW HIM AS...*

Shaken, the prisoner staggers over to sit in the chair.

PRISONER:

Oh!

ZOOM OUT TO LONG SHOT.

He stares into space.

FADE TO BLACK.

"I'M NOT LIKE THIS"

A Screenplay by Othniel Smith

SCENE 1. INT. DAY. TOMMY'S LIVING-ROOM.

Close-up of Tommy's face. He is in his twenties.

TOMMY:

They say you never feel the
pain from the smack on the
head that knocks you out.
That's what they say,
anyway.

He smiles sadly.

DISSOLVE

TO:

SCENE 2. EXT. NIGHT. A STREET CORNER.

Soundtrack music is all we hear. Sky, a girl in her late teens, stands on the corner, provocatively dressed, arms folded, looking bored, restless. Tommy appears, dressed smartly. Drunk, swaying, swigging from a bottle of beer. He wanders past Sky, glancing curiously at her. She ignores him. A few seconds later, he wanders back. They exchange a few words, which we do not hear. They walk away, Tommy closely, sheepishly following Sky, looking around him to make sure he is not being watched. We follow them as they disappear down a back-street.

Opening credits.

SCENE 3. INT. NIGHT. A PUB.

A few weeks later. Tommy sits, alone, leafing through a set of A4 sheets. A half-finished glass of beer is on the table next to him. Sky approaches. She is carrying a bottle of white wine and a glass. She pauses, and looks at him before sitting in the empty seat on the other side of the table. She sighs, pours herself a glass of wine, and puts the bottle on the table. Tommy looks up, briefly, then returns to his reading. Sky takes a sip of wine. She looks over at what Tommy is reading.

SKY:

That looks exciting.

Tommy looks up at her.

TOMMY:
I'm sorry?

SKY:
Looks like a right barrel of
laughs, that.

Tommy smiles politely and returns to his reading. Sky
takes another sip of wine.

SKY:
So this is a night out for
you, is it?

Tommy looks up again.

TOMMY:
I'm sorry?

SKY:
Sitting in the pub, reading
your school report?

TOMMY:
Presentation.

SKY:
What?

TOMMY:
It's a presentation.

SKY:
Oh.

Tommy returns to his reading. Long pause.

SKY:
Important?

TOMMY:
(not looking up)
I'm sorry?

SKY:
Is it important?

TOMMY:
In terms of saving Western
civilisation, no. In terms
of me keeping my job, yes.

SKY:
Fair enough.

She takes another sip of wine. Long pause.

SKY:
You've been on that page for
a long time.

TOMMY:
It's a difficult page.

SKY:
Oh.

Long pause.

SKY:
So what's it about? Your
presentation?

TOMMY:
It's really not that
interesting.

SKY:
Try me.

TOMMY:
Trust me. You're not missing
anything.

Long pause.

SKY:
You don't remember me, do
you?

Tommy looks up.

TOMMY:
Yes. I do. I do remember
you.

SKY:
Oh. That's nice.

Tommy sighs.

TOMMY:
So, this is what you do, is
it?

SKY:

What?

TOMMY:

When you see somebody? When you're out, and you see somebody. A bloke that you... someone you've... is this what you do?

SKY:

Is what what I do?

TOMMY:

Are you trying to embarrass me?

SKY:

Just having a quiet drink.

TOMMY:

Money? Is it money?

SKY:

Oh. Now I'm offended.

TOMMY:

... Oh. I'm sorry.

SKY:

That's okay. Happens all the time.

(she looks at his sheets)

Sales projections, Western region. Scintillating stuff.

TOMMY:

I told you.

SKY:

So you did.

Tommy returns to his reading. Sky continues to drink. When he can take it no longer, Tommy looks up again.

TOMMY:

Look... erm... I'm sorry, I don't know your name.

SKY:

Sky.

TOMMY:
Sky. I... really? Sky?

SKY:
What's wrong with it?

TOMMY:
Nothing. It's a very nice
name.

SKY:
Too nice, eh?

TOMMY:
Listen... Sky... I just want to
say... what happened... that
night... what... what we did... it
wasn't me.

SKY:
Your twin brother, maybe? A
hologram?

TOMMY:
No, I... I mean, it was me,
obviously. But it wasn't... I
was drunk.

SKY:
Yes. I remember.

TOMMY:
I mean... that's not the kind
of person I am. I'm not the
kind of person who does...
that kind of thing.

SKY:
I believe you. Thousands
wouldn't.

TOMMY:
I was... it was a moment of...
weakness. I just... well, it's
been a while since... and... I
saw you, and I... well, I just
felt... you looked so... and I
thought...

Long pause. They look at one another.

SKY:
Married?

TOMMY:
No.

SKY:
Girlfriend?

TOMMY:
No.

SKY:
Boyfriend?

TOMMY:
I... still haven't found that
special guy.

SKY:
There you are, then. No harm
done.

TOMMY:
It's just... I'm not the kind
of man who does that kind of
thing.

SKY:
Relax, kid. You didn't
actually do a lot. You just
kind of stood there. While I
did... my kind of thing.

TOMMY:
(looking around
him, hoping that
no-one heard)
Yes, alright, I remember.

SKY:
You really were very, very
drunk.

TOMMY:
Yes, yes, thank-you, I get
the picture.

Sky chuckles. Long pause. Tommy looks away.

SKY:

Sorry. I'm making you feel bad about yourself.

TOMMY:

Sure. That's what people do. Some people. Some people, that's the only way they can get to feel good about themselves.

SKY:

Ouch. Stabbed in the heart.

TOMMY:

Sorry.

He takes a large swig of his beer.

TOMMY:

Look, I'll be off. Leave you to... whatever.

SKY:

You don't have to go. Not on my account.

TOMMY:

I... I need to get back. Good night's sleep.

SKY:

Ready for your presentation, first thing in the morning.

TOMMY:

That's about the size of it.
(he grimaces)
So to speak.

He smiles, and starts to get up.

SKY:

Anyway, good talking to you. Thanks for being nice.

Tommy freezes, then sits back down.

TOMMY:

Nice? I wasn't nice! How can you say I was nice? I ignored you, I accused you

of trying to blackmail me,
and... well... you know... there
was the other thing...

SKY:
Ah. And nice boys don't do
the other thing.

TOMMY:
Well, I... I... do they?!

SKY:
You don't get out much, do
you?

She sighs and refills her wine-glass.

TOMMY:
Expecting company?

SKY:
I'm having a night off.

TOMMY:
I meant... that whole bottle?
All to yourself?

SKY:
I like wine. It's the nectar
of the gods, you know.

TOMMY:
Oh? It gives me wind.

Sky chuckles. Tommy holds out his hand.

TOMMY:
Tommy. I'm Tommy.

Sky takes his hand.

SKY:
Sky.

TOMMY:
I'll believe you. Thousands
wouldn't.

They smile at one another.

DISSOLVE
TO:

SCENE 4. INT. NIGHT. SKY'S BEDROOM.

Sky is lying in bed, unclothed, but covered with a sheet. She stares into space. A middle-aged man is doing up his trousers. He sits on the bed. As he speaks he puts on his socks, shoes, tie, etc.

CUSTOMER:

The deepest green, they were. Quite startling, utterly beguiling. One really doesn't come across green eyes all that often. Oh, a vague turquoise, sometimes, common-or-garden blue with the merest hint of green. Then there's that hazel colour, which is basically... well, it's not much of anything, really. But hers were bright green. I mean... not grass-green, that would be silly. Emerald-green, that's it. Not that I've ever actually seen an emerald, come to think of it. Not a sizeable one, in any case. They looked... her eyes looked like the sea. On a wondrous, cloudless day. "I could swim forever in those eyes", I used to tell her. And she'd giggle. A beautiful, tinkling laugh she had. A laugh like a mountain stream. "Tell me again", she'd say. "Tell me again about my beautiful eyes". And I would. And she'd kiss me. Her lips so soft, so warm. When she'd kiss me, and pull away, and gaze into my eyes, with me lost in hers... I could almost forget how ridiculously fat she was.

He chuckles to himself and pats Sky's bottom.

CUSTOMER:

Ah, the eternal mystery of woman. Do you know who else you remind me of? Although, these days, I suppose I could be accused of being politically incorrect for saying it. You remind me of my daughter. In an entirely innocent way, of course. I mean, I could never... well, obviously.

He looks at Sky.

CUSTOMER:

Depressed? Yes, I imagine you would be. Still. It's the way of the world. The man feels as though he's conquered a mighty empire. To the woman... it's as though yet another shred of her secret soul has been torn away.

(a sudden thought)

Are you... are you going to take drugs?

(pause)

Can I watch?

Sky remains expressionless.

DISSOLVE
TO:

SCENE 5. EXT. NIGHT. THE CITY CENTRE.

Soundtrack music is all we hear. Sky and Tommy walk together, not arm in arm, but chatting, laughing, sharing chips.

DISSOLVE
TO:

SCENE 6. INT. NIGHT. THE PUB.

Tommy sits with his mate Dave. Both are quite drunk.

TOMMY:

I mean, don't get me wrong, she's a lovely kid. Lovely. And when I say "kid", I mean... she's not actually a kid, I mean, to look at her, she... she could be anything from, like, fifteen to thirty, but... all I mean is she's younger than me. But, you know, legal. Not that we've... you know. Not after that first... thing. She's young, and... no, not naïve, I mean, of course she's not naïve, look what she... look at all the shit she puts herself through. She's just... you just see in her face that she's someone who still has... dreams. Hopes, and that. I mean, I do like her, I like her a lot, but... what can you do? It's like... Marilyn Monroe.

Dave looks at him, incredulous.

DAVE:

Marilyn Monroe? Are you serious?

TOMMY:

I mean in the sense that... you look back at Marilyn Monroe, or... or Princess Di, or someone like that, and you think... if I'd been there. If I'd been there I could have done something. I could have saved her. Saved her from Them. Saved her from herself. But I couldn't have saved her. A, because she wouldn't have looked twice at an insect like me. And B, because... because women like that don't want to be saved. They're addicted to the excitement, to the drama of being

unsaveable. Do you know what
I'm saying?

DAVE:
Oh yeah. The drama. They
love the drama.

Both Tommy and Dave sigh, and drink from their pints.

DISSOLVE
TO:

SCENE 7. INT. DAY. THE HALLWAY OF TOMMY'S HOUSE.

Knocking at the door. At first tentative, then more
and more insistent. Tommy rushes to open it.

TOMMY:
Yes, yes, alright, don't
bust the bloody thing down!

He opens the door. Sky is standing there. One side of
her face is virtually obscured by a large dressing -
someone has cut her with a knife. We see that she has
been crying.

TOMMY:
Sky?! Shit! What's happened!

SKY:
It doesn't matter.

TOMMY:
Who did this?! Who did this
to you? I'll kill him.

SKY:
Can I come in?

Tommy stands back to let her in. He closes the door.
His hands on her shoulders, he looks at her face.

TOMMY:
But this is... who did it?

SKY:
It doesn't matter who did
it.

TOMMY
:
I'll kill him! I'll kill the
bastard!

SKY:
No you won't. Because you're
not that kind of person.
That's why I like you.

TOMMY:
But... you can't... he can't...

SKY:
Yes he can. He can because
he can.
(she sighs)
Hold me. Please? Just hold
me.

Tommy kisses her forehead, and they embrace,
platonically.

DISSOLVE
TO:

SCENE 8. INT. DAY. TOMMY'S LIVING-ROOM.

Tommy and Sky are seated together on the sofa, hand
in hand. They stare at us.

SKY:
They say you never feel the
pain from the smack on the
head that knocks you out.
Well... they're liars.

Tommy and Sky continue to stare at us.

FADE TO
BLACK.

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